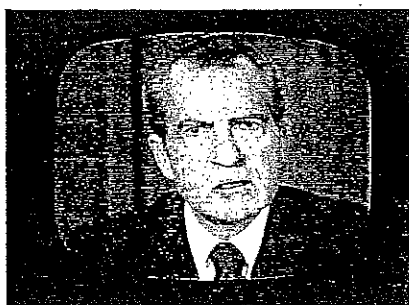




TIMES PAST

Rise & Fall: President Richard Nixon at his second inaugural ball in January 1973; and (below) announcing his resignation 17 months later.



WATERGATE

How a “third-rate burglary” 40 years ago this June led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon

BY VERONICA MAJEROL

No one paid much attention when news first broke of the burglary on June 17, 1972, at the Watergate hotel-office-apartment complex in Washington, D.C.

Five men wearing business suits and surgical gloves were caught trespassing early that morning on the sixth-floor headquarters of the Democratic National Committee. It turned out it wasn't the first time they'd broken in: Three weeks earlier, the men had secretly installed wiretaps on the office phones, and they were repairing the bugs when they got caught.

At first the media didn't take the burglary too seriously—*The New York*

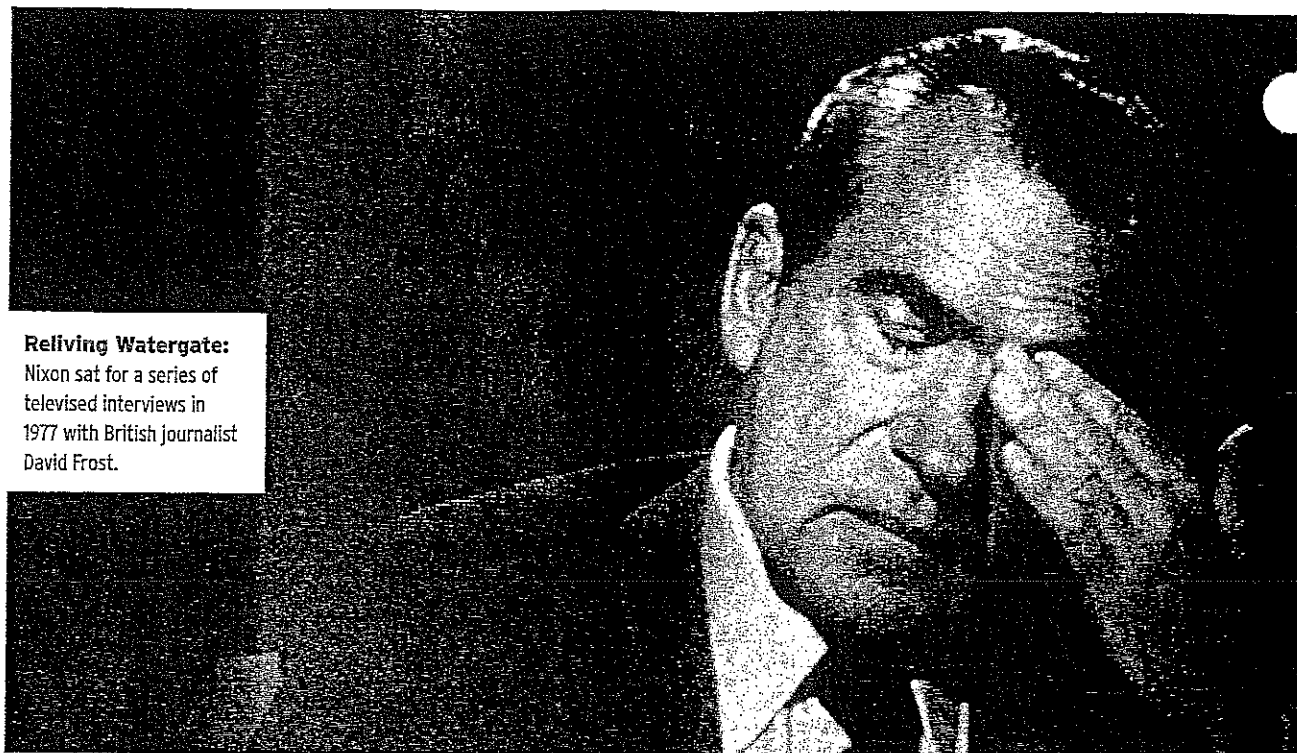
Times ran its story on page 30—and the White House dismissed the break-in as “just a third-rate burglary attempt.”

Though the break-in was quickly linked to President Richard Nixon's reelection committee, it would take many months before a number of crucial players—including the FBI, journalists, congressional investigators, and prosecutors—would begin to piece together the truth: that the incident was part of a larger conspiracy of spying, payoffs, coverups, and other criminal abuses of executive power. Forty years later, the Watergate affair and Nixon's subsequent resignation—the only presidential resignation in U.S. history—still stands as the greatest scandal in American politics.

“It was a dreadful time in our history, and it had very negative effects,” says Marc Landy, a political science professor at Boston College. “It was one of the important factors in undermining Americans' trust in government.”

Turbulent Times

When Nixon was running for president in 1968, the entire country seemed on fire. In April, race riots broke out across American cities following the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis, Tennessee. In June, Senator Robert Kennedy of New York, one of the front-runners for the Democratic nomination for President, was assassinated in Los Angeles. And



Reliving Watergate:
Nixon sat for a series of
televised interviews in
1977 with British journalist
David Frost.

all year, crowds of students and young people took to the streets to protest the increasingly unpopular war in Vietnam.

Nixon promised to restore order to the country and defeated his Democratic opponent, Vice President Hubert Humphrey, in the '68 election. But he was frustrated to find the Democrats, who controlled both houses of Congress, blocking many of his initiatives. In 1972, Nixon's re-election committee, led by his close political associates, was determined to end the gridlock by winning a decisive victory and sweeping Republican majorities into Congress. They launched an aggressive campaign against their Democratic opponents, in some cases crossing the line between legitimate political tactics and criminal activity.

When rumors began to circulate that the White House might have played a role in the break-in, Nixon immediately denied them.

"No one in this administration, presently employed, was involved in this very bizarre incident," he said at a press conference in August. "This kind of activity, as I have often indicated, has no place whatever in our political process."

Most Americans took his word for it. In November, Nixon trounced his Democratic opponent, Senator George McGovern of South Dakota, winning re-election with 61 percent of the vote to McGovern's 38 percent.

On Jan. 30, 1973, just 10 days after Nixon's inauguration, the five Watergate burglars pleaded guilty in a district court in Washington, D.C., and two others were convicted for planning the break-in. But thanks in part to the persistence of two young reporters at *The Washington Post* named Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, the story didn't end there.

Unlike much of the media, Woodward and Bernstein stayed on the Watergate story after the break-in. They wrote more than 200 articles in the first six months and revealed many of the "dirty tricks" Nixon's re-election committee played, such as making false accusations against political opponents. Much of the reporters' information came from an anonymous source they called "Deep Throat," who—it was finally revealed in 2005—was second in command at the FBI. Woodward and Bernstein won the Pulitzer Prize in 1973 for their coverage of Watergate, and many credit them

with giving new prominence to journalism and emboldening the press to probe political misconduct. Their 1974 book *All the President's Men*, was made into Academy Award-winning movie in 1976.

True Reality TV

After the January convictions, others started to speak up. In March 1973, James McCord—one of the seven convicted in the January trial—sent a letter to Judge John Sirica, who had presided over the case. The letter said that higher-ups had pressured the burglars to plead guilty and to perjure themselves. These revelations on top of some unanswered questions surrounding the case prompted the Senate to hold hearings, which they began televising in May.

Unlike most congressional hearings today, the Watergate hearings were high drama—true reality TV that riveted millions of Americans.

"People would sneak out from work and watch," says Landy of Boston College. "And that's when the country really took it to heart."

John Dean, whom Nixon had recently fired as White House Counsel (law, to the president), testified that Nixon

FOLLOWING THE Watergate Trail ...

1 June 17, 1972
Five men are arrested for breaking into the Watergate complex (below) in Washington, D.C.

2 Jan. 1973
Two months after President Nixon is re-elected, the five Watergate burglars plead guilty.

3 March 1973
Nixon officials are alleged to have pressured the burglars to lie about the break-in.

4 May 1973
The nation is riveted by the televised Senate Watergate hearings.

5 July 1973
A Senate committee learns of Nixon's secret White House tapes and subpoenas them, but he resists handing them over.

6 July 1973-July 1974
After Nixon releases some tapes, Congress investigates grounds for impeachment; the Supreme Court orders Nixon to hand over all of the tapes.

7 Aug. 5, 1974
The so-called Smoking Gun tape is found, confirming the president's involvement in the Watergate coverup.

8 Aug. 9, 1974
Facing impeachment and possible expulsion from office, Nixon resigns (his letter, above) and is succeeded by Vice President Gerald Ford.

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON
August 9, 1974
Dear Mr. Secretary:
I hereby resign the Office of President of the United States.
Sincerely,
Richard M. Nixon
The Honorable Henry A. Kissinger
The Secretary of State
Washington, D. C. 20520
11:35 AM

became involved in the coverup of the Watergate burglary within days of the break-in, and that over the years, he had engaged in political espionage against those he considered "enemies," a list that included many members of the press. Other staffers revealed that Nixon had authorized hush money for the Watergate burglars and ordered the forging of State Department documents to smear previous administrations. Citing executive privilege—an unofficial power that allows the president to resist some subpoenas from Congress and the courts—Nixon refused to address these allegations before the Senate committee.

The most sensational revelation came in July 1973, when a former White House aide revealed that Nixon had a secret taping system in the Oval Office and had been recording his conversations and



Washington Post reporters Carl Bernstein (left) and Bob Woodward won a Pulitzer Prize in 1973 for their coverage of Watergate.

phone calls since 1971.* The recordings could confirm whether the president was involved in the coverup, but Nixon repeatedly defied the Senate's orders to hand over the tapes. Under intense pressure, Nixon released some of the tapes in October 1973.

One recorded conversation between Nixon and his White House Chief

of Staff on June 20, 1972—three days after the break-in—contained a suspicious 18-and-a-half-minute gap. Nixon's secretary, Rosemary Woods, testified that she had accidentally deleted the segment while transcribing the conversation. But by this time, many Americans suspected that the president did, in fact, play a role in the coverup of the break-in and should be held responsible.

Over the next few months, Congress deliberated whether there were grounds for impeachment. Article I of the Constitution grants the House of Representatives the right to "impeach" (essentially, to indict) a public official if a majority find evidence of "treason, bribery, or other high crimes or misdemeanors." The Senate then holds a trial and can remove the official from office,

*Five other presidents from both parties recorded some of their conversations: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson.

but only with a two-thirds vote.

By the summer of 1974, the House was discussing three possible charges against Nixon: obstruction of justice in the Watergate case, violating the rights of certain citizens, and unconstitutionally denying the committee's subpoenas.

On July 24, 1974, the Supreme Court voted unanimously to order Nixon to release all 64 tapes. Among them was the "Smoking Gun" tape, from June 23, 1972—six days after the Watergate break-in: It seemed to confirm the president's role in the coverup, though not in the break-in itself.

With impeachment by the House all but certain, Richard M. Nixon became the only president in U.S. history to resign, on Aug. 9, 1974.

"If some of my judgments were wrong," he said in his resignation speech, "they were made in what I believed at the time to be the best interest of the nation." Gerald Ford, his vice president, succeeded Nixon and

pardoned him the following month, saying it would help the country heal.

In later years, Nixon was able to rehabilitate his image as an elder statesman of the Republican Party. Today he is also remembered for his considerable achievements in office, such as opening up relations with China, negotiating nuclear-arms reductions with the Soviet Union, and establishing the Environmental Protection Agency.

Watergate's Legacies

Watergate remains a stark example of executive power run amok, and it changed the way the nation views the presidency. A 1974 poll showed that Americans' trust in the president had declined by 50 percent over a two-year period. "Overall," says Professor Landy, "we've never gone back to that pre-Watergate era."

One legacy of Watergate is that every big Washington scandal since then has become a '-gate': President Reagan's

Iran-Contra problems became known as "Irangate," and President Clinton's affair with a White House intern was coined "Monicagate" (see "Trouble in the White House," below).

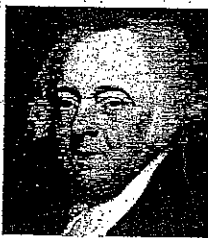
But Watergate also led to changes that reined in presidential powers. The War Powers Resolution Act of 1973 requires the president to get Congress's approval for some military actions; whistle-blowers now have more protection under the law; and the Privacy Act of 1974 gives citizens the right to review records about themselves and correct inaccuracies.

But as the 2012 presidential election approaches, Landy warns that while Watergate made people more skeptical about government, its lesson shouldn't be to make us cynical about the entire political process.

"Watergate is a kind of low point in the history of our politics, and we shouldn't treat it as if it were the normal way things are done," he says. "The reality is not actually as terrible most of the time." •

Trouble in the White House

Other presidents who've found themselves in hot water



JOHN ADAMS
(1797-1801)

XYZ AFFAIR

Adams is blamed for a 1798 diplomatic episode that led to a two-year undeclared war with France and deep divisions between the Federalists and Democratic-Republicans.



ANDREW JOHNSON
(1865-69)

IMPEACHMENT

A hostile Congress impeaches President Lincoln's successor for violating a law that's later ruled unconstitutional. The Senate vote is 35 to 19, one short of the two thirds needed to remove Johnson from office.



WARREN HARDING
(1921-23)

TEAPOT DOME

Harding's administration is tainted when his Secretary of the Interior is convicted and jailed for selling the rights to oil reserves in Teapot Dome, Wyoming, for personal profit.



RONALD REAGAN
(1981-89)

IRAN-CONTRA

Reagan's administration secretly sells weapons to Iran in exchange for American hostages, then uses the money to fund the anti-Communist 'contras' in the Central American nation of Nicaragua.



BILL CLINTON
(1993-2001)

MONICA LEWINSKY

In 1998, Clinton becomes the second U.S. president to be impeached after lying about his relationship with a 25-year-old White House intern. He is acquitted by the Senate.

CORE IDEAS

Article title and page number: _____

Answer the following questions.

1. Share the central ideas and key details of the article in a brief summary.

2. How is this issue or event relevant today? Is it particularly relevant to young people? Cite evidence from the article to support your response.

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CORE IDEAS (continued)

- 3. Identify two words or phrases in the text that are unfamiliar to you. Write the meaning of each and cite any context clues from the text that help you determine their meanings.**

- 4. Describe the author's point of view and/or purpose in writing this article. Cite evidence from the text.**

- 5. Consider an accompanying element that supports the main text, such as a graph, timeline, separate article, or video. (Videos and other digital content are available at upfrontmagazine.com.) How does the second source contribute to your understanding of the topic? Compare and contrast the main text and accompanying element.**
