

The Fall of a President

Former White House Chief of Staff Bob Haldeman once noted that “Without Vietnam, there would have been no Watergate.” Haldeman, along with several other Nixon aides, served time in jail for the part he played in the Watergate scandal, which shocked the nation and led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon.

On June 13, 1971, the New York Times began publishing a series of articles dubbed the Pentagon Papers. These articles were the result of a study directed by former Secretary of Defense Robert MacNamara. MacNamara had ordered the study done to discover how America had gotten into the Vietnam War. He wished to learn what mistakes had been made in the process. The Pentagon Papers pointed out many mistakes and showed the government’s callous attitude toward the bloodshed caused by the war. The study was not intended for immediate publication, but it was leaked out to the press.

President Nixon was furious that the Pentagon Papers were published. Even though the study dealt with previous administrations instead of his own, he felt that they were a personal attack on his policies. In an **unprecedented** move, he attempted to have the articles **censored**. However, the Supreme Court ruled that the president did not have the authority to censor the newspaper. The publication of the study continued, and the public learned more about the background of the war.

Nixon felt **besieged** by enemies. Following the publication of the Pentagon Papers, Nixon formed a secret group of men known as the “Plumbers.” It was their job to plug any further “leaks” to the press that would be damaging to Nixon. However, the duties of the Plumbers soon grew. They became involved in a variety of illegal activities, including breaking into Democratic headquarters located at the Watergate Hotel.

In 1972 Nixon was running for re-election. Despite doing well in public opinion polls, Nixon wanted to be sure of victory. He believed that having information about his opponents could be crucial. On June 17, 1972, the Plumbers broke into the Democratic Party Headquarters at the Watergate Hotel. The Plumbers took pictures of documents in the offices and planted listening devices on the phones. They wished to find information that could be used to discredit Nixon’s opponents. The Plumbers had been illegally bugging the phones of Nixon’s political enemies for some time; however, this time they were caught. Their arrest was not big news at the time because no one realized the connection between the burglars and the president.

In November 1972 Nixon won the election easily, but early in 1973 evidence was discovered that linked the Plumbers with top White House aides. President Nixon insisted that he had not participated in the plans for the break-in, nor had he helped “cover up” connections between the White House and the Plumbers. Nixon did not think that investigators could find any evidence linking him to the break-in.



Richard Nixon

Archibald Cox was appointed to head the investigation of the Watergate affair. In the course of his investigation, Cox discovered that Nixon had kept tape recordings of all of his meetings in the White House. Cox submitted a **subpoena** for the tapes, believing that they might indicate if Nixon had known of the break-in or cover-up. Nixon appealed to the courts to prevent Cox from getting the tapes, but the courts ruled in Cox's favor. Nixon knew that he had been caught. The tapes would clearly prove his guilt in the cover-up. In a desperate move, Nixon had Cox fired from his post as head of the investigation team.

Impeachment proceedings started in the House of Representatives in October 1973. The charges against Nixon were very serious. He was accused of obstructing justice, abusing presidential powers, and disobeying subpoenas. Nixon had continued to disregard the subpoena ordering him to turn over the tapes. In July 1974 the House of Representatives voted to recommend that Nixon be impeached. A vote in the Senate was to decide Nixon's fate.

Nixon's advisors informed him that he had no chance of prevailing in the Senate vote. By this point, the American people had lost all faith in Nixon. It was clear that he had lied about his role in the Watergate break-in. Many of his closest aides were already being prosecuted. Knowing that he was finished, Nixon submitted his resignation on August 9, 1974. Gerald Ford became the new president.

Shortly after becoming president, Ford decided to pardon Nixon. Many Americans were upset, but Ford felt that the country would only be damaged further if Nixon was put on trial. Many of Nixon's aides and associates were convicted and served time in jail, but Nixon was allowed to retire peacefully.

Coming shortly after the end of the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal further eroded the public's faith in their government. Previously, Americans had held an innocent faith in their national leaders. Vietnam and Watergate generated new feelings toward government among the American people. Trust and confidence were replaced by suspicion and disillusionment.

Think About It

1. Gerald Ford decided to pardon Nixon for the crimes he committed. Ford was widely criticized for this decision. Many people felt that Nixon should have been punished. Do you think that Ford should have pardoned Nixon?
2. The Watergate scandal and resignation of President Nixon were difficult events for Americans to accept. Nixon is the only American President to resign from office. How do you think most Americans felt about our government after Nixon resigned?

Dictionary Exercises

Find the definitions to the following words:

1. Unprecedented
2. Censor
3. Subpoena
4. Impeachment
5. Besieged

Name _____ Date _____

Challenges

1. What newspaper first published the Pentagon Papers?

2. Who had ordered the Pentagon Papers study to be done?

3. What did Nixon attempt to do when the first portions of the Pentagon Papers were published?

4. What was the name of the group of men who were formed to protect President Nixon from "leaks"?

5. What were the Watergate burglars looking for when they broke into Democratic headquarters?

6. Who was in charge of investigating the Watergate scandal?

7. What key piece of evidence did Nixon possess, but refuse to give up to investigators?

8. What proceedings did the House of Representatives begin in October 1973?

9. What did Nixon do on August 9, 1974?

10. What controversial action did President Ford take to end any further prosecution of Richard Nixon?
