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Impeachment and Resignation (Overview)

The 1972 presidential race pitted the current president, Richard Nixon, against the more liberal George McGovern. During the course of the campaign, Nixon's staff used unfair tactics to give their candidate an edge. When *The Washington Post* journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein began to unravel the story behind a break-in at the Watergate building, it was the beginning of the end of the Nixon presidency.

Investigation

In 1973, the Senate established a Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities. North Carolina senator Sam Ervin chaired the committee, which began to look into rumors of corruption and dirty tricks in the Nixon reelection campaign. By March, the committee had new evidence, as one of the seven convicted Watergate burglars, former CIA agent James McCord, admitted that he was being pressured to keep quiet.

The Break-In

McCord's testimony led directly to his "overall boss," John Mitchell, who served as attorney general and then as chair of the Committee to Re-Elect the President (CREEP). Testimony at the trial of the burglars had already identified CREEP's connection to the Watergate burglary and to other "dirty tricks."

The Cover-Up

In April, L. Patrick Gray, acting director of the FBI, resigned, admitting he destroyed evidence about the Watergate scandal. Increasing evidence pointed to the involvement of top Nixon aides, both in ordering the Watergate burglary and in orchestrating a cover-up. In June, presidential aide John Dean told the Select Committee that President Nixon authorized payment of hush money to the burglars.

As the hearings continued into the summer, many people were glued to the live coverage on their television sets and radios. Presidential aide Alexander Butterfield revealed that Nixon had secretly recorded all conversations in his Oval Office. The committee wanted the tapes for evidence. Nixon resisted, claiming executive privilege.

Impeachment

After a summer of Watergate hearings, the House of Representatives moved into action. In October, the House Judiciary Committee announced that it would begin an impeachment investigation. As the investigations continued, they broadened. New evidence showed illegal campaign contributions from oil companies and airlines. President Nixon's tax deductions came under scrutiny, and he ended up paying more than \$400,000 in back taxes.

Throughout the ensuing months, Nixon followed a pattern of turning over some material but refusing full access to tapes and documents subpoenaed by both congressional committees. Finally, on July 24, the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously ruled that Nixon had to turn over the evidence. When he did, important tapes had been erased.

In July, the House Judiciary Committee approved three articles of impeachment, charging Nixon with obstructing justice and violating his oath of office.

Resignation

With key aides and Cabinet members convicted of Watergate-related crimes; with the president himself forced to admit that he had concealed evidence; with even Republicans in Congress reluctant to support the president, Nixon resigned from office. He was the first and only president to resign.

In September, President Gerald Ford granted Nixon a "full, free and absolute pardon" for all offenses he committed while president.

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