

The Politics of Cynicism, 1968–1974

As 1968 dawned, no one could have predicted the political landscape that would prevail little more than a year later. President Lyndon Johnson, widely regarded as a political maestro and the recipient of landslide endorsement by the voters four years earlier, would be in lonely exile in Texas on his Johnson City ranch. Former Alabama governor George Wallace, reviled by most of the public in the early 1960s for his clenched-teeth refusal to bow to civil rights advances whose time had come, would loom as a future presidential possibility based on his strong showing as a third-party candidate in November's presidential election. Most significantly, Richard Nixon, who six years earlier had angrily announced his exit from politics, would occupy the White House. The Democrats would still control both houses of Congress, largely through inertia; but in truth, the party would lie in tatters as a result of the epic intra-party battles inside and outside the Chicago convention hall in which Hubert Humphrey secured the nomination as the Democrats' standard-bearer in August. Finally, thanks to the inroads made by both Nixon and Wallace during the bitterly contested presidential campaign, the Solid Democratic

Deadlock and Disillusionment: American Politics since 1968, First Edition.

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South, which had prevailed for so many decades, would no longer be reliably Democratic.

Miseries unleashed by the Vietnam War were responsible for much of this turning inside out of American politics. But so, too, were the deep wounds inflicted by the assassinations of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and Bobby Kennedy, and the many lives lost and hopes dashed in the riot-torn spring and early summer of 1968. In a sense, Nixon's triumph in the three-cornered presidential election of 1968 served as the ultimate expression of the sense of futility that so many Americans felt. A man who owed his political ascent to his skill at "slash-and-burn" politics (witness his role in the nefarious Alger Hiss case and his 1950 campaign against the "pink lady," Helen Gahagan Douglas) had been called upon by the voters to try to bring order out of political chaos. "Bring Us Together Again"—the mythical slogan that Nixon invented and cited during his campaign—would be the theme of his inaugural speech in January 1969.

As president, Richard Nixon did anything but bring the nation together. Having successfully employed a divisive "southern strategy" to win first the Republican nomination and then the White House, he continued to encourage divisiveness in the electorate in the supposed interests of the "Silent Majority" of Americans whom he saw as aggrieved by the liberal excesses of the Great Society and hostile to the mostly youthful protesters who had taken to the streets in opposition to the Vietnam War and—sometimes—authority in general. Far more the cynical and self-interested pragmatist than the principled conservative for whom many of his supporters had hoped, Nixon carved out a mixed record in domestic policy. Having strongly implied in the 1968 campaign that he had a plan to end U.S. participation in the war in Vietnam with honor, he instead steadily escalated a damaging air war against the enemy until, four years into his presidency, he found a way to extricate U.S. troops from a losing situation.

Ultimately, Nixon was done in by the very cynicism that had propelled him into the White House and fueled his major decisions as president. Obsessed with winning re-election in

1972, distrustful of nearly everyone around him, and certain that his political critics were potential enemies of the state, he condoned illegal tactics to eliminate any and all challenges to his presidency. Then—even worse—he lied repeatedly to the American people about his role in such excesses. As a result, less than two years after having won a smashing re-election victory, he became the first U.S. president to resign from office. If the American people were “brought together” by the Nixon presidency, it was only in shared disgust and distrust for all things Washington.

The Shaping of a New Majority

Forces pointing to backlash against the national Democratic party were of nearly unprecedented proportions in 1968. First and foremost, of course, was the deep public frustration with the course and costs (in lives and dollars) of the Vietnam War, especially after the Tet offensive in February, in which the enemy caught U.S. forces by surprise. Added to this were widespread distaste and disappointment with what were seen as the excesses of President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, especially its civil rights component. Nearly as powerful was a deepening public concern about crime in the streets and the increasing stridency and violence of protests against the war and around race issues. “In the popular mind,” writes Lewis Gould in *1968: The Election that Changed America*, “the state of race relations became linked to protests against the war in Vietnam. The resulting social trauma was seen as evidence that the Johnson administration was insensitive to issues of ‘law and order’ and unwilling to take a tough stand against domestic dissent.” Simultaneously, significant changes in the demographics of the United States had obvious political implications. The mushrooming growth and increasing political clout of the “Sunbelt,” and particularly its sprawling suburbs, held great, if still incalculable, potential for upending liberal Democratic dominance.

Lyndon Johnson’s vulnerabilities were so extreme by late 1967 as to invite potential challenges from within his own party. First

to emerge, at the end of November, was Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota, who had responded to the pleadings of anti-war activists to take up their cause (after their first choice, New York's senator Robert F. Kennedy, had declined to take the political risk). When McCarthy confounded early predictions by winning 42 percent of the Democratic vote in the March 12 New Hampshire primary (to Johnson's 49 percent), the media treated it as a defeat for the president. Four days later, a potentially more formidable challenge presented itself when the once reluctant Kennedy formally announced his own anti-war candidacy.

Johnson later claimed that he had much earlier discussed with his wife Lady Bird and his close political ally John Connally the possibility of not seeking re-election and that he had originally planned to include such an announcement in his January 1968 State of the Union address. Whether or not he had made up his mind earlier, on March 31 the president stunned the nation by announcing at the end of a televised speech on the war, "I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President."

All bets were now off as to how the Democratic race might turn out. McCarthy and Kennedy, as the only declared candidates, briefly had the contest to themselves. In late April, however, a third candidate emerged: Vice President Hubert Humphrey. As vice president, Humphrey had suffered more than a few cruel, public humiliations at the hands of Johnson, but he had remained loyal, in the hope that someday he would have his own shot at the presidency. Declaring too late to contest the two anti-war candidates in the primaries (which he would likely have lost anyway), Humphrey set to work among local and state party leaders in order to amass the necessary number of delegates for nomination.

Kennedy and McCarthy traded victories in a string of hard-fought primaries into the early summer. The June 5 California contest was critical. As the final votes were being tallied in the Golden State's primary, Kennedy's victory seemed at last to have narrowed the contest to a two-man race between himself and Humphrey. Within moments of exiting his victory celebration in

a Los Angeles hotel, however, he was assassinated by a single gunman, Sirhan Sirhan. As the horror of yet another senseless assassination slowly faded in the weeks that followed, gloom and despair deepened in the Democratic party. Without the support of those who had backed Kennedy, it was impossible for McCarthy to prevail in the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, but deep and lingering animosities between the backers of the two anti-war candidates created a divide that could not be breached.

The Republican nomination contest, meanwhile, unfolded relatively smoothly. The campaign of the early front-runner, Michigan governor George Romney, had imploded in February as a result of his unfortunate comment that he had been “brain-washed” while meeting with U.S. military leaders in Vietnam. His withdrawal from the field on the eve of the important New Hampshire primary resulted in a whopping victory for Richard Nixon, who won almost 80 percent of the vote. Only two challengers remained: New York governor Nelson Rockefeller, the choice of the most moderate elements in the GOP; and a rapidly rising star on the party’s right, California’s recently elected governor, the telegenic former movie star Ronald Reagan. Rockefeller waited too long to declare himself a candidate and won only one primary. Reagan was another matter. Wildly popular among Republican conservatives because of his effective and loyal support for Barry Goldwater in the disastrous 1964 GOP presidential campaign, he had the additional advantage of being a fresh new face (and voice). In 1968, however, Reagan was still *too* new, and Nixon had built well. Nixon sat squarely in the driver’s seat, with nearly enough pledged delegates for nomination before the Miami convention opened.

Even before the two parties could sort out their respective nomination battles, a dangerous third force had appeared in the 1968 election campaign in the person of former Alabama governor George C. Wallace. Having run surprisingly well in the 1964 Democratic primaries, the still-unrepentant segregationist was running on a new American Independent Party (AIP) ticket in ’68, and his name was on the ballot in virtually every state for the November election. Though eschewing outright segregation as an

objective, Wallace advocated slowing down desegregation of the nation's schools and called for stronger prosecution of the war in Vietnam, as well as forceful suppression of the growing anti-war protests. His promise to roll his limousine over the bodies of protesters who might try to get in his way captured the essence of his message. Although there was never any chance that he could win the election, it seemed possible that he could hold the balance of power in the House of Representatives, if neither major party candidate was able to win a majority in the Electoral College.

The results of the 1968 presidential election were foreshadowed by the tale of the two major party conventions. The Republicans, convening in an orderly manner in Miami in mid-August, experienced only minor drama, as the Reagan forces attempted to woo southern delegates away from the Nixon camp. They proved no match, however, for South Carolina's wily senior senator, Strom Thurmond, who helped lock up Nixon's nomination by assuring his southern colleagues that Nixon was safe on the busing issue and would be reliable in making future Supreme Court nominations. Nixon's selection of Maryland governor Spiro Agnew as his running-mate solidified his support among party conservatives, since Agnew had recently made his name as a hard-liner in response to urban rioting in his state.

The chaos at the Democrats' convention in Chicago a couple of weeks later stood in sharp contrast to Nixon's coronation in Miami. Though Humphrey's nomination was a foregone conclusion, the televised violence between protesters and Chicago police officers that unfolded immediately outside the convention hall captured the attention of millions of potential voters. In what a specially appointed presidential commission later described as a "police riot," Chicago's finest dented the heads of scores of disillusioned anti-war protesters who were demonstrating against the vice president's nomination because of his seeming complicity in the carnage in Vietnam. Humphrey's choice of Maine senator Edmund Muskie as his running-mate was credible enough, but the ticket was in tremendous trouble from the outset.

The southern strategy that had won Nixon his party's nomination was very much in evidence in the fall campaign. The Republicans'

strategy matched to a tee the scenario laid out by a young Nixon campaign aide, Kevin Phillips, in his widely read 1969 book, *The Emerging Republican Majority*. Very soon, Phillips argued, American politics would be dominated by a conservative, Sunbelt-based majority made up of Roman Catholic working-class and suburban middle-class voters. This bloc should be the GOP focus in the campaign. With Wallace in the mix, moreover, Nixon could not and did not totally avoid playing the “race card.” In the South, especially, his ads emphasized opposition to busing to effect school desegregation and suggested that a vote for the third-party candidate would be wasted since the “real choice” was between himself and Humphrey.

In the face of Nixon’s southern strategy and Wallace’s darker appeal to the more conservative elements of the traditional Democratic coalition, Humphrey was all but helpless. Finally, in late September, he broke from administration policy on the war, promising a halt to the bombing of North Vietnam by U.S. warplanes if elected—hugely irritating President Johnson in the process. As later evidence would show, however, in the final stages of the campaign Johnson became aware of outright illegal tampering by the Nixon campaign in the stalled Paris peace talks, whereby the Republican candidate’s minions were attempting to persuade South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu to boycott negotiations with the promise of getting a better deal from a President Nixon. Johnson chose not to drop a bombshell on the electorate by “outing” Nixon for this violation of law, but he privately seethed and gave Humphrey an important boost just days before the election by announcing a bombing halt as well as the resumption of peace talks in Paris. This helped, but not quite enough. Though the Democrat had seemed to edge ahead in the polls on the final pre-election weekend, when the votes were tallied, Nixon had defeated him by a scant 0.7 percent, with a “mandate” of 43.4 percent of the electorate; Wallace’s projected 20 percent of the vote shrank to just over 13 percent. In the all-important Electoral College, however, Nixon prevailed handily, winning 301 electoral votes to Humphrey’s 191 and Wallace’s 46 (all in the Deep South).

Richard Milhous Nixon was now the thirty-seventh president of the United States—on his own terms and on script. He had skillfully blended sympathy for the South's resistance to the civil rights revolution with an appeal to suburban, middle-class voters who had been turned off by the Great Society. Appealing to what he called the "Forgotten Americans," Nixon heavily emphasized the "law and order" issue, code for racial unrest in the cities, and scored heavily with white voters by doing so; a Harris poll two months before election day found that 84 percent of those responding thought a strong president could make a real difference in returning safety to the streets. He had stayed away from the Vietnam War as an issue, insisting that he did not want to undermine Johnson in his conduct of that conflict. This lack of focus on Vietnam was to have a real cost. "Precisely because the debate over the war during 1968 proved to be so meaningless," writes Walter LaFeber in *The Deadly Bet: LBJ, Vietnam, and the 1968 Election*, Nixon would be able to "continue to commit to the conflict for five more years"

The overall election results suggested deadlock. Nixon's coat-tails were so short that neither house of Congress went Republican. He was, in fact, the first newly elected president since Zachary Taylor in 1849 to face a Congress completely in the hands of the political opposition. Even by picking up five seats in the Senate, the Republicans cut the Democratic majority only to 58-42. In the House, the GOP gained only four seats, leaving the Democratic majority at 243-192.

That the southern strategy would carry over into Nixon's presidency became clear immediately, as he announced in his inaugural address that he would seek no additional civil rights legislation, since the nation's laws had now "caught up with our consciences." Within months, Attorney General John Mitchell testified in congressional hearings against renewal of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which the Democratic Congress renewed anyway. With greater effect, the administration intervened to temper the impact of the Supreme Court's 1968 decree in *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* that so-called "freedom of choice" plans could no longer be used to delay desegregation of

unitary school districts. In July 1969, when twenty-three Mississippi districts affected by the *Green* decision appealed for a delay, the White House issued a mixed statement. "This administration is unequivocally committed to the goal of finally ending racial discrimination in schools," read the White House release, adding that the deadlines facing the Mississippi districts might need to be extended to allow their appeal to be heard by the Supreme Court.

A key ingredient of Nixon's southern strategy during the campaign had been his oft-repeated promise to appoint conservatives to the Supreme Court. Almost immediately, he had an unprecedented opportunity to make good on this commitment by appointing two new justices. This unusual situation had resulted from a late 1968 deal between Chief Justice Earl Warren and outgoing president Lyndon Johnson that had gone sour. Fearing that the 1968 election would produce a president unlikely to appoint a chief justice sympathetic to the legacy of the liberal court he had led, Warren offered to retire as chief justice so that Johnson could elevate liberal justice Abe Fortas to the post. When Fortas's questionable business dealings and inappropriate continuing connections to the White House became issues, however, he was not only denied the chief justice position but was ultimately forced to resign from the court altogether. The result: two vacancies for Nixon to fill, including that of chief justice.

As chief justice, Nixon named Warren Burger, a respected if not overly distinguished conservative jurist from Minnesota, who was easily confirmed. To fill the second vacancy, the president wanted to appoint someone more obviously reflecting sympathy for the South. His first choice, Circuit Court judge Clement Haynsworth of South Carolina, was rejected by a bipartisan coalition in the Senate because of his failure to recuse himself from more than one case in which there had been an appearance of conflict of interest. Fighting mad, Nixon next nominated Judge G. Harrold Carswell of the Fifth Circuit Court, who lacked any obvious distinction, more than 60 percent of his opinions having been reversed by higher courts. The final straw was the revelation that several years earlier Carswell had publicly declared his belief

in “white supremacy.” The nomination was dead on arrival in the Senate, although the margin of defeat was only six votes.

Carswell’s rejection gave Nixon an opportunity to make political hay in the South. Now he could publicly identify with the “martyrdom” of the region. The day after Carswell’s defeat, Nixon angrily stated that he understood “the bitter feelings of millions of Americans who live in the South about the act of regional discrimination that took place in the Senate yesterday,” and pledged not to invite another such affront to the region. His next nominee, Judge Harry Blackmun from Minnesota, was confirmed easily.

Nixon did not yet control the Supreme Court, however. In October 1969, the justices spoke again on desegregation, ruling against the recalcitrant Mississippi districts in *Alexander v. Holmes County Board of Education*. In a unanimous decision, the court insisted that “effective immediately ... the schools in those districts be operated on a unitary basis.” Reiterating its reasoning in *Green*, the court asserted that “continued operation of segregated schools under a standard of allowing ‘all deliberate speed’ for desegregation is no longer constitutionally permissible.” With possibilities for any further delay now ended, President Nixon finally urged compliance and courts across the South began to address the remaining instances of “dual,” or segregated, districts.

An effective desegregation strategy employed by many school districts even before the *Alexander* decision was the transporting of students to schools outside their immediate neighborhood to create racially balanced schools. “Mandatory busing,” unsurprisingly, was opposed by many parents, white and black alike, who feared for the safety of their children. Court challenges sprang up immediately, with most of the pressure coming from suburban white parents. The most publicized such challenge unfolded during the 1969–1970 school year in the 85,000-student Charlotte-Mecklenburg County school district in western North Carolina. In the face of this controversy, Nixon issued a statement affirming the “inviolable principle” of neighborhood schools and drawing a sharp distinction between *de facto* and *de jure* segregation. Where segregation was not the result of legal (*de jure*) segregation but

rather of residential patterns, he held, “school authorities are not constitutionally required to take any positive steps to correct the imbalance.”

Busing played an important part in the 1970 mid-term elections. Influenced by his conservative advisor Pat Buchanan, Nixon believed the path to firming up the “new majority” that he thought had elected him was to concentrate on social issues that could be divisive for the Democrats. To effect the strategy, Nixon unleashed Vice President Agnew as his surrogate (“Nixon’s Nixon,” the press dubbed him—a reference to the president’s earlier role as hatchet-man for Eisenhower as his running-mate in 1952 and 1956). Agnew took up his role with zeal, spewing alliterative epithets against Democrats all across the nation, in the process coining the term “radic-libs” to paint them as being far outside the American political mainstream. Although the election results were disappointing for the GOP—a pickup of only two seats in the Senate and a loss of nine in the House—they were not bad for the party of a sitting president in off-year elections. Overall, however, the administration’s strategy had some long-term costs. “The GOP’s abandonment of the middle ground created an opening for a new breed of moderate Democrats,” writes Matthew Lassiter in *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South*, “who dominated southern politics during the 1970s and assumed leadership of the national party during the 1990s.”

The mid-term elections did nothing to resolve the divisive busing issue, and instead inflamed further those on either side of it. Once again, it was left to the judiciary to move the matter forward. In April 1971, the Burger Court obliged, taking up the case from Charlotte-Mecklenburg County (*Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg County Board of Education*). Sweeping aside arguments that busing was difficult, awkward to implement, and contrary to the American tradition of local control of schools, the court unanimously asserted that the principle of “paired schools” and the busing of students between those schools were both constitutional and permissible as tools to redress segregation. The court explicitly acknowledged the potential difference in cases of *de jure* and *de facto* segregation and limited the scope of its decision in an

important way. The *Swann* decision was far from being the final word on busing, however. “We do not reach in this case,” the justices stated, “the question whether a showing that school segregation as a consequence of other types of state action, without any discriminatory action by school authorities, is a constitutional violation requiring remedial action by a school desegregation decree.” Left unresolved was the question of what to do in those hundreds of school districts—largely outside the South—where “dual systems” existed solely as the result of segregated residential patterns.

Predictably, the Nixon administration responded coolly to the High Court’s decision, stating simply that “it was the obligation of the local schools and district courts to carry out the mandate in *Swann*.” Polls showed steadily declining public support for busing: in a November 1971 Gallup survey, 76 percent of all respondents opposed “busing of Negro and white school children from one school district to another”; among blacks, 45 percent were in support and 47 percent opposed.

Conservatism as Reform

To a degree Nixon neither expected nor desired, he was preoccupied by economic problems throughout his presidency—that is, until Watergate swamped all other issues. Lyndon Johnson’s effort to afford both “guns and butter” had been only a minor issue in the 1968 election, but by the time of Nixon’s inauguration in January 1969, inflation demanded attention. As Allen Matusow writes in *Nixon’s Economy: Booms, Busts, Dollars, & Votes*, the new administration had two choices: pop the balloon quickly or “let the air out ... slowly.” Nixon opted for the latter approach, which failed utterly. By the end of the year the nation faced steadily worsening unemployment, while inflation continued unabated—an unprecedented scenario that the media dubbed “stagflation.” The administration’s response was a wildly shifting series of interventions and economic controls that were inconsistent with traditional Republican policies and never comfortably embraced by Nixon himself.

As inflation continued at troublesome levels into 1970, Nixon surprised politicians and public alike by naming John Connally as his new secretary of the treasury. A former Democratic governor of Texas and longtime ally of Lyndon Johnson, Connally was perfect for the assignment and his impact on administration policy was soon apparent. In August 1971, Nixon announced a New Economic Policy (NEP) in a nationally televised speech, which included the imposition of price and wage controls for the first time since the Korean War. The NEP also included a new 10 percent “border tax” on imports and ended the longstanding convertibility of dollars into gold on the world market.

Price and wage controls proved ineffectual, however, as inflation stubbornly continued to rise. Consequently, Nixon announced Phase II of the NEP in October, extending the controls for another six months. When this extension had little impact, he simply opted for disengagement, labeling as “Phase III” the virtual suspension of all controls. Shifting focus to the problem of unemployment, which was hovering around 6 percent, the administration now took steps to ramp up federal spending.

Just as Nixon’s handling of stagflation defied easy characterization, his approach to matters of social policy was difficult to pin down. In August 1969, he announced the launching of a “New Federalism,” including two bold new programs, revenue sharing and an overhaul of the existing welfare system. The New Federalism never assumed coherent shape, nor did the Democratic Congress take action on either revenue sharing or the welfare reform proposal. Undaunted, and with even greater fanfare, in January 1971 Nixon reintroduced both plans, along with several others—including a bold plan for restructuring the executive branch under an even more sweeping label: “The New American Revolution.” Of the administration proposals embraced in this new “reform” package, revenue sharing now seemed to have the greatest likelihood of passage. The basic idea was to substitute categorical grants to the states in six broad areas (education, urban development, transportation, job training, rural development, and law enforcement), for the vast array of narrowly defined federal grant programs that had grown up since the New Deal.

The concept had strong public support at the outset, but many members of Congress—liberal and conservative alike—were wary of losing control of this federal largesse. In the end, however, the State and Local Fiscal Assistance Act was enacted in June 1972, with considerable support from both parties. Initially authorized for five years, revenue sharing would remain intact into the 1980s.

The welfare reform element of the New American Revolution, the Family Assistance Plan (FAP), was an even harder sell than revenue sharing. In direct contrast to the latter program, FAP aimed to replace a number of categorical programs administered at least partly at the state level with direct federal income assistance to low-income families. The program proposed annual federal payments of \$1,600 (scheduled to rise to \$2,500 by 1971) to low-income families of four, coupled with a requirement that the heads of such families—excepting mothers of young children—be willing to “accept work or training.” FAP drew fire from both extremes of the political spectrum in Congress. On its final run around the congressional track on the eve of the 1972 election, it was defeated mainly due to opposition from liberal Democrats, but Nixon probably did himself more damage with conservatives than with liberals in pressing for this version of welfare reform. As David Greenberg has written in *Nixon’s Shadow: The History of an Image*, FAP was “the source of the right’s conception of Nixon as a sellout,” and “dashed [their] hopes of a Nixon-led right-wing revival.”

Within twenty-five years of Nixon’s presidency, observes Greenberg, “Nixon revisionism” had blossomed full-blown among historians and journalists. In these revisionist works, he notes, “Nixon appeared, improbably, as an innovator in domestic policy, an activist steward of the Great Society, the last of the big-spending liberal presidents.” This view contrasted sharply with earlier assessments, which tended to view Nixon’s overall impact as retrograde rather than progressive, especially when it came to matters of race and civil liberties. Notwithstanding such revisionist efforts, however, historians generally see Nixon’s domestic record as centrist, ascribing much of what seemed “liberal” to his chief domestic advisor, John Ehrlichman. Matusow writes, for

example, that “Nixon was neither a liberal nor the conservative of popular belief. He was a politician bent on preempting the center of American politics to build a New Majority.” Stephen Hess takes a slightly different slant in *The Professor and the President: Daniel Patrick Moynihan in the Nixon White House*, suggesting that Nixon’s overall domestic record was “moderate,” but only “by averaging—moving sharply right, followed by moving sharply left.”

There is a simpler explanation for the seemingly contradictory elements of Nixon’s domestic policies: cynicism. The 3,700 hours of Nixon White House tapes that have become public over the years provide ample evidence that he had contempt for the electorate and was motivated far more often by opportunism than by anything that remotely resembled either a reformist bent or concern about the federal government’s role in ensuring the “public good.” Insofar as ideology mattered to him in domestic matters, Richard Nixon was a conservative. What finally motivated him in any particular situation, however, was whatever was needed to ensure his own political survival.

The Politics of War and Détente

On the day before Richard Nixon’s inauguration, thousands of anti-war protesters staged a “counter-inaugural.” Estimated by D.C. police at 5,000 and by organizers at 12,000, the protesters symbolically marched from the White House to the Capitol—opposite to the direction Nixon would traverse the next day. This mostly peaceful protest was followed by greater visible hostility to the new president on Inauguration Day itself. As the limousine carrying Nixon and his wife Pat passed between the crowds lining both sides of Pennsylvania Avenue, 300 to 400 militant protesters shouted obscenities and lobbed sticks, stones, bottles, and smoke bombs at the motorcade. District of Columbia police, reinforced by combat-equipped National Guardsmen and unarmed troops of the 83rd Airborne Division, arrested eighty-one protesters.

Nixon’s inaugural address contrasted sharply with these scenes of contempt and hostility. In addition to promising to “consecrate”

his presidency to the cause of peace, he assured the nation that he was willing to listen to his critics. “We cannot learn from one another,” he said in one of the most oft-quoted sentences in the address, “until we stop shouting at one another—until we speak quietly enough so that our words can be heard as well as our voices.” *New York Times* columnist James Reston, no fan of Nixon’s, wrote approvingly that “[t]he hawkish, combative, anti-Communist, anti-Democratic Nixon of the past was not the man on the platform today. He reached out to all the people who opposed him in the last election—progressive Democrats, the young, the blacks, the Soviets.”



Figure 1.1 Nixon’s “Palace Guard,” H. R. “Bob” Haldeman and John R. Ehrlichman. In April 1973, both would be fired, along with White House counsel John Dean, due to fallout from the Watergate scandal. © Bettmann/CORBIS

Such optimism was grossly misplaced. Far from reaching out, Nixon surrounded himself with a “Palace Guard” in the White House, headed by the imperious H. R. (Bob) Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, that ensured minimal access to the president (and shielded him as much as possible from dissenting opinions). Within weeks of his move into the White House, Nixon was seething at congressional critics who seemed intent on challenging White House prerogatives in foreign policy. In February, Senator J. William Fulbright (D-Arkansas), chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC), infuriated the president by reintroducing a resolution that would increase congressional oversight of presidential commitments abroad and establishing a subcommittee of the SFRC to monitor secret executive agreements. Nixon’s national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, shared his boss’s low opinion of the legislative branch as a potential partner in foreign policy-making. Together, the two became increasingly secretive and manipulative in their dealings with Congress on Vietnam, as on many other foreign policy issues.

In addition to treating his congressional critics as traitors and enemies, Nixon dramatically ratcheted up secret intelligence-gathering on foes real and imagined in the broader public. While LBJ had begun such wiretaps, the scale of illegal surveillance dwarfed earlier actions. Later, declassified records revealed that over 1500 Americans were being spied on by 1973. Even FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, no defender of civil liberties, was nervous about the sheer volume of such government eavesdropping and, had he not cooperated by dying in May 1972, would likely have been fired by an angry Nixon for obstructionism after nearly half a century in his role.

In his quest for “peace with honor,” Nixon intended to continue the four-cornered Paris peace talks involving North Vietnam, the Republic of Vietnam, the National Liberation Front, and the United States, which his campaign had tried to disrupt near the end of the Johnson administration. The challenge was how to create leverage to produce progress at the negotiating table, while at the same time reducing the American military effort in order to undercut domestic opposition to the war.

“I’m not going to wind up like LBJ,” he told Haldeman, “holed up in the White House afraid to show my face on the street. I’m going to stop that war. Fast.” By March 1969, Nixon settled on a strategy he labeled “Vietnamization”: phased withdrawals of American troops coupled with significant increases in training and equipment for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Privately, he resolved to employ massive military force, as necessary, to force the North Vietnamese to agree to a settlement. In his first meeting with South Vietnam’s president, at Midway Island on June 8, Thieu publicly accepted the Vietnamization strategy—although clearly without enthusiasm. Always interested in grand framing for his actions, Nixon explained to reporters in mid-July that Vietnamization was part of a broad new foreign policy approach. According to this new “Nixon Doctrine,” nations that sought aid from the United States in ensuring regional security would be expected to take on greater responsibility for their own defense. At the same time, Nixon initiated the first draw-down of U.S. troops in Vietnam, announcing the withdrawal of 25,000 troops in late June.

Nixon took a surreptitious route almost immediately. In March 1969, he ordered the secret bombing of installations in North Vietnamese-controlled parts of Cambodia, directing Air Force command to falsify its logs to conceal from congressional investigators this violation of a neutral neighbor’s rights. Simultaneously, he issued the North Vietnamese an ultimatum that if there were no progress in the peace talks by November, the United States would take “measures of great consequence and force.” North Vietnam agreed to enter into secret talks with the United States, parallel to the official four-party negotiations, but otherwise ignored the deadline. Nixon was now boxed in. The public’s patience with Vietnamization was already waning, and both doves and hawks in Congress were becoming vocal in their criticisms. The participation of an estimated twenty million people in a nationwide moratorium on October 15 reflected this growing war-weariness.

In this dicey situation, Nixon focused on shoring up support at home, announcing the withdrawal of 60,000 additional troops by

mid-December and launching a public relations blitz to discredit his critics. On November 3, the president took anti-war protesters to task in a nationally televised speech, concluding his address with an appeal for support from “the great silent majority” of Americans whose voices, he argued, had not yet been heard. All of the elements of the Nixon–Kissinger strategy for achieving “peace with honor” were now in place: the imposition of Vietnamization on an unwilling Thieu; back-channel negotiations with North Vietnam, buttressed by extralegal exercises of brute force; and a public relations juggernaut to marginalize war protesters as un-American.

Nixon also sought to thin the ranks of the disaffected by ending the draft—and with it, of course, the monthly draft calls that were building anti-war sentiment among middle-class and more affluent voters. In this effort, the president enjoyed support from liberals and conservatives alike. Principled objections to conscription were reinforced by public disgust with the head of the Selective Service System, General Lewis Hershey, for his heavy-handed use of the draft to punish those who protested the war. In September 1969, Nixon fired Hershey, and three months later announced that the draft would be replaced by a lottery system based on a randomized ordering of birthdates. Following strong lobbying by the administration, Congress voted one final extension of the draft, which would expire in 1973. Nixon had achieved exactly what he wanted. The promise of transition to a professional army after the 1972 election scored political points with many voters (especially those 18- to 20-year-olds who were newly enfranchised by ratification of the Twenty-sixth Amendment in 1971), but the draft would not end so soon that it would undermine the administration’s negotiating position to end the war.

Meanwhile, the political weakness of the Thieu government posed a major obstacle to achieving “peace with honor.” The North Vietnamese remained obstinate in Paris, in both the official and secret negotiations, and their intransigence led a frustrated Nixon to engage in extralegal military actions that fanned the flames of the anti-war movement. Most notable—and

damaging—was his decision at the end of April 1970 to launch an “incursion” (a term intended to seem somehow less aggressive than “invasion”) into Cambodia.

Public outrage at the Cambodian incursion was most extreme on the nation’s college and university campuses. The most violent confrontation occurred at Kent State University in Ohio, where the National Guard opened fire on a crowd of assembled students, killing four and injuring eleven others. Ten days later, at historically black Jackson State University in Mississippi, disaster struck again as two students were killed and seven were injured. By the end of spring, approximately 80 percent of the nation’s colleges and universities had experienced anti-war activities of some sort, with 448 of them experiencing strikes or closure. Even in the face of these tragic events, however, the administration was not without supporters. On May 8, just four days after the Kent State shootings, approximately 200 construction workers attacked an anti-war march in New York City; ten days later, “hard-hat” rallies in support of the administration were held in numerous major cities. The administration publicly embraced such visible “patriotic support.” Later in the year, a Commission on Campus Unrest appointed by Nixon strongly criticized the way in which authorities had reacted to the campus protests, judging the student deaths at Kent State and Jackson State to be “unnecessary, unwarranted, and inexcusable.” Nixon privately called the report “crap.”

The Cambodian operation and the events that followed heightened congressional opposition. In June, the Senate voted to repeal the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which had authorized the U.S. military presence in Vietnam. Two other end-the-war measures, the Cooper–Church amendment to cut off funding for military operations in Cambodia and the McGovern–Hatfield amendment calling for the withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Vietnam, failed to pass, but the administration pulled all troops out of Cambodia as they were being debated “Although Nixon escaped with his power intact,” George Herring writes in *America’s Longest War*, “the Cambodian venture tightened the trap he had set for himself. The domestic reaction reinforced his determination

to achieve ‘peace with honor’ while sharply limiting his options for attaining it.”

Meanwhile, the court martial of Sergeant William Calley in March 1971 for atrocities his troops had committed at My Lai three years earlier fueled yet another round of anti-war protests across the nation. Heartfelt testimony by members of Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in April and May further energized the administration’s critics, culminating in the largest single anti-war demonstration yet to occur in Washington (300,000 protestors), with a companion demonstration half that size held in San Francisco. The administration responded viciously; on May Day, some 7000 protesters were rounded up and held in D.C.’s football stadium. But Nixon realized that time was running out.

The last thing the administration needed at this point was another crisis. On its face, the *New York Times*’s publication in early June of a top-secret Defense Department study of the origins of American involvement in Vietnam under previous presidents did not seem to pose any threat to the White House. Nor did Nixon initially regard it as a problem. Kissinger, however, was furious. and—knowing exactly which buttons to push—told Nixon that if he failed to take action, “It shows you’re a weakling, Mr. President.” Even though Nixon was not incriminated by anything in what came to be called the Pentagon Papers, the fact that a top-secret document had been leaked to the media was enough to make him responsive to Kissinger’s advice. He took immediate action, securing a court order enjoining the *Times* (and by then, the *Washington Post* and *Boston Globe*) from publishing any further material from the purloined Pentagon study. On June 30, 1971, the Supreme Court ruled 6-3, in *New York Times Co. v. United States*, that this attempt to bar publication was “a flagrant, indefensible” violation of the First Amendment, and public release of the Pentagon Papers proceeded unhindered. By the end of the summer, Bantam Books had published the entire study in a best-selling paperback.

Having lost the Pentagon Papers battle, Nixon gave in to his vindictive nature, approving formation of a “Plumber’s Unit” (so

named because its mission was to stop leaks) to get the goods on Daniel Ellsberg, the former RAND employee who had given the Pentagon study to the *Times*. Specifically, the unit was enjoined to break into the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist and steal his confidential medical information. The Plumbers came up with nothing for their efforts. When Ellsberg was eventually tried in May 1973 for stealing the secret documents, the judge declared a mistrial because "government agencies had taken an unprecedented series of actions" infringing on his liberties.

The revelations in the Pentagon Papers of a pattern of governmental deceit that had obscured early U.S. involvement in Vietnam further eroded support for the war. More than 70 percent of Americans now believed that it had been a mistake for the United States to have sent troops into Vietnam, and nearly 60 percent regarded the war as immoral. The administration's phased troop withdrawals helped, but one poll suggested that nearly half of those questioned felt that the pace of withdrawals was too slow. At this point, however—if not earlier—Nixon's "peace with honor" strategy was all about securing his re-election.

In late January 1972, Nixon went on television to reveal the private peace talks that had been going on for more than two years. At the same time, he pressured Thieu to consent to the public release of nine "principles" for peace that had been given to the North Vietnamese the previous fall. Thieu, however, had not seen the nine principles until then. Nixon, Kissinger, and Thieu were all aware that such a ceasefire would doom Thieu's government, and it was imperative from Nixon's point of view that this not occur until he was safely re-elected. The North Vietnamese further complicated matters for the administration by launching a massive offensive against the South at the end of March. Nixon, however, was not to be bullied. He responded by giving the go-ahead for Operation Linebacker, the most massive bombing raids yet, and for the mining of Hanoi and Haiphong harbors. These aggressive actions eventually succeeded in blunting the North Vietnamese offensive. On July 1, Nixon announced the withdrawal of an additional 20,000 troops, leaving fewer than 50,000 in the field.

Negotiations in Paris dragged on throughout election year 1972. Nixon and Kissinger held firmly to the position that the complete withdrawal of American troops depended on a final settlement that would include the return of all prisoners of war (POWs) and an internationally monitored ceasefire; nothing was said about the integrity of the Thieu regime or (as North Vietnam wanted) possibilities for a coalition government in the South. Meanwhile, the toll in lives on both sides increased steadily. As the presidential election neared, negotiations in Paris finally began to inch toward the kind of agreement for which Nixon was now willing to settle. Nixon knew, however, that more work was needed with Thieu to make sure that he would go along. To achieve that assurance, he wrote a series of secret letters to Thieu in which he promised that the United States would come to South Vietnam's aid if the North violated the terms of the proposed settlement. These letters did not become public until 1975; to that point, no one in Congress knew anything about Nixon's promise, in effect, to re-enter the Vietnam War if the accords should be violated. No matter—it is unlikely that Nixon intended to do so.

In the short run, the tactic worked. After a stumble at the bargaining table in December that led to a resumption of the American offensive (the so-called “Christmas bombing”), the North Vietnamese returned to the table. On January 23, 1973, Kissinger and North Vietnamese lead negotiator Le Duc Tho initialed a settlement, basically on the terms laid out by Nixon during the previous year. Four days later, all four parties to the formal Paris talks officially signed the accords. For the United States, at least, the Vietnam War was over.

Historians agree that the peace terms achieved in 1973 were no better than Nixon could have obtained in his first year in office. He does not seem ever to have engaged in second-guessing on this point, however. In fact, emboldened by achieving “peace with honor,” he let off a fusillade at the congressional doves who had caused him so much grief for the previous four years. As reported by Larry Berman (*No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam*), shortly after the signing of the accords, the White House distributed a “Vietnam White Paper” to

members of Congress with a message both bitter and self-congratulatory:

For four agonizing years, Richard Nixon has stood virtually alone in the Nation's capital while little, petty men flayed him over American involvement in Indochina... . [O]ver all these years, there were the incessant attacks from the United States Congress—the low-motivated partisan thrusts from many who envied the President's office and many more who cynically molted their hawk's feathers for those of the dove... . No President has been under more constant and unrelenting harassment by men who should drop to their knees each night to thank the Almighty that they do not have to make the same decisions that Richard Nixon did.

The White Paper concluded with a paean to “the millions upon millions of quite ordinary Americans—the great Silent Majority of citizens—who saw our country through a period where the shock troops of leftist public opinion daily propagandized against the President... . They were people of character and steel.” For Nixon, the timing of the Vietnam peace settlement was everything. His game plan had been to end U.S. involvement in a way that would not cause problems for his re-election in 1972. Once it became clear that the Thieu regime could not be saved, it was not in Nixon's interest to have the war end too soon; the last thing he wanted was to have North Vietnam overrun the South before Americans were able to go to the polls to give him “four more years.”

Had he not been saddled with the Vietnam War, Richard Nixon might have succeeded in creating a lasting legacy in international affairs; of course, absent the war, he would not likely have been elected. Certainly he wanted to be able to focus on such a grand strategy. (“If there were a way we could flush Vietnam now, flush it, get out of it in any way possible, and conduct a sensible foreign policy with the Russians and with the Chinese,” White House tapes recorded him telling Kissinger in May 1972, “we ought to do it.”) For most of his foreshortened presidency, however, relations with both the Soviet Union and China devolved into a “linkage” strategy, where any diplomatic breakthroughs had to be

viewed within the calculus of winding down the United States' interminable involvement in Southeast Asia.

Détente with the Soviet Union was perhaps the strongest example of Nixon's *realpolitik*. His realism (and dexterity) showed in his balancing advocacy for development of a new and costly Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) system along with a Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I) with the Soviets in 1972. SALT I was not an easy sell with Congress, however. As Melvin Small recounts in *The Presidency of Richard Nixon*, "[d]oves who thought that the agreement did not go far enough and hawks who felt that the Soviets had gained the most united in opposition." Success was achieved because "[t]he hawks received new arms systems and the doves the promise that the SALT process would continue."

While détente might be seen as only a gradual shift from the summitry that previous presidents had conducted, Nixon's dramatic opening up of relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) was truly revolutionary. The same *realpolitik* was at work that underlay détente with the Soviets. Following secret negotiations conducted on his behalf by Kissinger, Nixon announced in mid-July 1971 that the first-ever presidential visit to the PRC would occur before the following spring. The visit occurred in February 1972, receiving the wall-to-wall media coverage for which Nixon had hoped. Although the joint communiqué issued by the two governments at the conclusion of the visit did not stand American policy on its ear, it came close. Recognizing the differences that separated the United States and the PRC, the communiqué pledged that neither nation would "seek hegemony" in the Asia-Pacific area. Most alarming to longtime Cold Warriors was the statement that the United States—while continuing to recognize the independence of Taiwan—would ultimately end its military presence there. Nixon had set U.S.-Chinese relations on a new path and in doing so he had accomplished the historic.

In the first decade or so after Nixon's presidency, scholars gave Nixon high marks for foreign policy, notwithstanding the ultimate outcome in Vietnam. As more documentation of the

back-channel negotiations to end the war became available, however, and the costs of Nixon's relative inattention to the Middle East and parts of the developing world grew more obvious, both the objectives and achievements of Nixon–Kissinger diplomacy have fared less well with historians. There is also the matter of the way in which policy was conducted. In the introductory essay to their edited volume, *Nixon in the World*, Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston discuss the issue of morality in Nixon–Kissinger foreign policy. Noting that both the president and his national security advisor took an “amoral worldview” that eschewed ideology to achieve “realistic” ends, they acknowledge that critics “on both the right and the left have charged that an amoral worldview was effectively *immoral*.” Although both Nixon and Kissinger admittedly emphasized ends over means, it is impossible to overlook their constant resort to secrecy and manipulation in dealing with foreign leaders, as well as with Congress and the American public. The stunning revelations that emerged as the Watergate scandal unfolded only increased the legacy of distrust spawned by the Nixon–Kissinger approach to foreign policy.

Watergate and Its Aftermath

The scandal that ended Richard Nixon's presidency was deeply rooted in his personality—his obsessive hatred of his “enemies,” paranoia about information leaks, and penchant for control—but it was also a product of the challenges of winding down American involvement in the Vietnam War and launching what seemed to be a tough re-election campaign. Historians agree that Nixon's behavior in Watergate grew directly from his desire to defend his Vietnam policies—as well as reflected his basic character. “Nixon's Watergate behavior,” Keith Olson contends in *Watergate: The Presidential Scandal That Shook America*, “was not the behavior of a political aberrant; rather it was the behavior of a consummate politician... . He rose to the top, step by step, within the system and, consequently, like most presidents, reflected the political values of the system.”

The Watergate break-in was part of a “dirty tricks” strategy orchestrated by the Committee to Re-elect the President (CREEP) to subvert the 1972 Democratic primaries. Since Nixon and his White House entourage believed his re-election essential to national security, it is unsurprising that they considered such nefarious operations justified, despite the enormous risks of discovery. The dirty tricks project was designed primarily to advance the prospects of Senator George McGovern, whom Nixon strategists saw as the easiest Democrat to beat in November, at the expense of the presumably more electable Edmund Muskie. After Muskie was derailed, another potential obstacle to McGovern’s nomination was removed when George Wallace was forced out of the campaign in mid-May. Once again, as in 1968, violence helped to determine the outcome of a Democratic presidential nomination contest. After winning the important Florida primary and making strong showings in a number of others, Wallace appeared to be gaining momentum when, on May 15, he was struck down by a would-be assassin’s bullets in a Maryland shopping center. Paralyzed by the assassination attempt, Wallace was no longer a factor in the contest for the nomination.

In addition to being aided by a dwindling field, McGovern was able to capitalize on strengths of his own. As Bruce Miroff points out in *The Liberals’ Moment: The McGovern Insurgency and the Identity Crisis of the Democratic Party*, as the strongest anti-war candidate in the primaries, the South Dakota senator had inherited the support of Gene McCarthy’s “middle-class and youthful antiwar activists, and the grassroots organizers who had first learned their art in his campaign,” while at the same time cultivating “the Kennedy people and the Kennedy image of compassion for the poor.” McGovern also benefited from the Democratic party’s delegate selection reforms adopted after the 1968 convention to reduce the influence of party bosses—including the end of “winner take all” primaries. After the June 6 California primary, in which McGovern defeated Humphrey by five percentage points, the Democratic contest was effectively decided—and in precisely the way Nixon had hoped.

Unnecessary as it now was, “Operation Gemstone,” CREEP’s codename for an elaborate scheme of campaign subversion including a plan to bug the telephones at the Democratic National Committee headquarters, moved ahead. On the night of June 17, 1972, seven men—including two with earlier connections to the CIA—were caught by D.C. police while attempting to plant wiretaps on DNC phones. When asked about the incident the next day, John Mitchell (who had resigned as attorney general in the spring in order to head CREEP) declared that the “people involved were not operating either in our behalf or with our consent.” This lie was the first of many that would ultimately be exposed in court and in the congressional Watergate hearings. No evidence exists that Nixon personally knew anything about the crime before it occurred, but by June 23 he understood that the operation had been carried out with CREEP’s full knowledge. Instead of publicly repudiating those behind it, as he still could have done, he made the fateful choice to “tough it out” and conceal any administration involvement. It was this decision to cover up, not the crime itself, that led to his downfall.

The Watergate story has been recounted in scores of books, including the memoirs of several complicit White House figures, two special prosecutors, and a federal judge, as well as the works of numerous historians and journalists. The first major account, *All the President’s Men*, was published in 1974 before the denouement. In it, *Washington Post* journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein presented the fruits of their investigative reporting throughout the summer and fall of 1972, which had strongly suggested connections between White House and CREEP higher-ups and the Watergate burglars. Woodward’s and Bernstein’s anonymous source, whom they called “Deep Throat,” provided information that proved to be 100 percent accurate. (Little wonder the information was so accurate; at the time of his death nearly forty years later, “Deep Throat” was revealed to be then-deputy director of the FBI Mark Felt.)

Despite the ominous reports about possible White House complicity in Watergate, the campaign developed in a way that could not have been more advantageous to Nixon and his team.

McGovern, after winning the Democratic nomination with over 60 percent of the primary vote, experienced a disastrous convention. His acceptance speech was delayed until the wee hours of the morning, long after most TV viewers had gone to bed, and his choice for a running-mate, Senator Thomas Eagleton of Missouri, turned out to be a disaster, when it was revealed that he had undergone electroshock therapy for “depression.” Within a week of his nomination, McGovern forced Eagleton off the ticket, substituting Sargent Shriver, a Kennedy in-law. The damage done by the Eagleton episode, however, could not be repaired. McGovern began the campaign approximately 30 percentage points behind Nixon, and never closed the gap. The election produced a landslide comparable to Lyndon Johnson’s eight years earlier, with Nixon winning every state but one (Massachusetts); the District of Columbia also went for his opponent, leaving Nixon with 510 of 527 possible electoral votes.

For all the damage that McGovern’s candidacy did to his party’s chances, the reluctance of American voters to grant too much power to a single party was evident in the congressional election results. Despite the landslide for Nixon, Republicans picked up only twelve seats in the House, leaving them in the minority by 192 to 242. In the Senate, the GOP actually lost ground, as the Democrats increased their majority from 54-44 to 56-42. Nixon now confronted a Democratic-controlled Congress more liberal than before—just as the Watergate issue was about to explode.

Looking toward his second term, Nixon mused about forming a new party that would combine the Republican base with the “new majority” he imagined that he had created. He spoke frequently with Haldeman and Ehrlichman in the weeks after the election about the possibility of luring Connally into such a party, and then helping him to become president after his own term was completed. (Nixon had, in fact, seriously considered substituting Connally for Agnew on the 1972 ticket. In the end, he stuck with Agnew largely because of the vice president’s value as a hatchet-man on the campaign trail.) According to Haldeman, Connally told Nixon that he thought the plan for a new party “unworkable.”

Reinstalled in the White House, Nixon proceeded to act as if the election had created something of permanence on which he could build in his second term. As a first step, he designed a dramatic executive reorganization plan to centralize policy-making in the White House. As Ehrlichman explained to the *Washington Post* at the time, “There shouldn’t be a lot of leeway in following the President’s policies. It should be like a corporation, where the executive vice presidents ... are tied closely to the chief executive.” In January, Nixon proposed a draconian budget for the next fiscal year, making it clear that if Congress should attempt to fund any of the programs for which he proposed drastic cuts or elimination, he would exercise his right to impound the appropriated funds. As Stanley Kutler notes, in *The Wars of Watergate*, “No constitutional language specified such authority.” No matter. Nixon proceeded to impound billions of dollars that Congress appropriated for pollution control and other purposes.

The president and his lieutenants could not have acted with worse timing in taking these aggressive measures. The unraveling had begun. On January 8, the grand jury trial of the Watergate burglars began in Judge John Sirica’s courtroom. On January 30, the jury brought in a guilty verdict against all seven defendants. Sirica, highly skeptical that the buck stopped with these seven, then exercised his power to set the date for sentencing, delaying it until March in the hope that one or more of the defendants would decide to cooperate with the court in exchange for leniency. At the beginning of February, the Senate voted unanimously to establish a Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities to pursue three areas of investigation: the Watergate break-in and possible cover-up; the dirty tricks that had marred the 1972 pre-convention campaign; and alleged illegalities in campaign financing. Conservative Democrat Sam Ervin (North Carolina), a recognized expert on constitutional law, was selected to chair the Watergate Committee, with moderate Republican Howard Baker of Tennessee as vice chair.

While the nation waited for the Senate committee to begin its work, a final act was played out in Judge Sirica’s courtroom. On March 23, the day of sentencing, former CIA agent James

McCord, one of the seven convicted of the break-in, wrote to Sirica that the defendants had been pressured to remain silent, that the break-in had nothing to do with the CIA, and that “government officials” were involved. The judge read McCord’s letter aloud in court before sentencing the burglars. Hoping to speed the unraveling of the case, he gave all seven maximum sentences but then gave them some direct advice. “I recommend your full cooperation with the grand jury and the Senate Select Committee,” the judge said. “[S]hould you decide to speak freely, I would have to weigh that factor in appraising what sentences will be finally imposed” The lid was beginning to come off the Watergate cover-up.

For the next seventeen months, the Watergate investigation dominated the news. Even before the Senate committee began its televised hearings in May, the situation began to deteriorate for the White House. As would later be revealed, the president had been well aware of most of the details of administration involvement since June 23 of the previous year. Unaware of that fact, in mid-April Attorney General Richard Kleindienst came to the White House to deliver to Nixon what he thought would be shocking news. In addition to Mitchell, Kleindienst reported, Haldeman, Ehrlichman, White House counsel John Dean, and several CREEP officials were all deeply implicated. The attorney general advised Nixon to ask for Haldeman’s and Ehrlichman’s resignations, and to appoint a special prosecutor in order to blunt the congressional investigation.

Nixon badly needed a scapegoat. Looking out only for himself, he had Ehrlichman go to Mitchell to ask him to take the blame for the break-in and cover-up, but the stubborn Mitchell was unwilling to do so. The president knew, meanwhile, that Dean was talking to the prosecutors. Fearing that Dean might seek immunity by implicating others in the White House, Nixon issued a public statement in mid-April that “no individual holding, in the past or at present, a position of major importance in the Administration should be given immunity from Prosecution.” As more bad news surfaced daily, prominent Republicans called for the president to appoint an independent special prosecutor.

On April 29, Nixon summoned his two loyal lieutenants, Haldeman and Ehrlichman, to ask for their resignations; Kleindienst and Dean were asked for theirs, as well. The next day, the Senate, by voice vote, approved a resolution calling for a special prosecutor. On May 17, the Senate Watergate Committee opened its televised hearings, which would span a total of fifty-three days, involving thirty-three witnesses and 237 hours of testimony. Two days later, Attorney General Elliott Richardson (who had replaced Kleindienst) appointed the eminent legal scholar Archibald Cox of Harvard University as special prosecutor. Thereafter, the Watergate Committee and two successive special prosecutors worked in parallel to piece together the sordid story of the cover-up.

Throughout May and June, testimony to Ervin and his colleagues by a parade of White House and CREEP officials built the case, brick by brick, against the president's top aides—but not yet against the president. On July 13, Haldeman's former assistant, Alexander Butterfield, unexpectedly revealed to committee staff that Nixon had installed a taping system in the Oval Office, his residence at Camp David, and the Cabinet Room. "*Everything,*" Butterfield told the stunned staffers, "was taped ... as long as the President was in attendance." Nixon did everything he could over the next several months to avoid handing over the tapes, claiming executive privilege. In turn, the committee voted unanimously to subpoena them; on the same day, Judge Sirica granted Special Prosecutor Cox's request for a similar subpoena. When Nixon refused the subpoenas, asserting he would only comply under order by the Supreme Court, leading conservative Republicans publicly criticized the president for the first time. Calling Nixon's refusal a "smoke screen," Barry Goldwater asserted that the president should "come before the Senate Watergate Committee and television cameras and tell the truth." In an August 23 cover story, *Time* magazine joined the growing chorus of critics, noting that "people with nothing to hide do not hide things."

While the subpoena issue worked its way through the courts, Nixon ran into another crisis of enormous magnitude—this one involving his vice president. Largely because he had been so

distrusted by Nixon and his principal aides, Vice President Agnew had been outside the loop on Watergate. He had his own serious legal problems, however. Nixon had known since April of a case against the vice president being built by federal prosecutors in Baltimore, but probably because he considered the continuing presence of the lightly regarded Agnew to be a safeguard against his own impeachment, he had not acted on the knowledge. As press reports tumbled one upon another through August and September, however, the details of the allegations emerged: Agnew was accused of taking kickbacks from construction firms while a Baltimore County supervisor in the early 1960s, and then while serving as Maryland's governor. By late September, as Jules Witcover explains in *Very Strange Bedfellows: The Short and Unhappy Marriage of Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew*, it was clear that Nixon "wanted Agnew out, and the sooner the better." Agnew, writing self-servingly in his 1980 memoir, *Go Quietly ... or Else*, saw the whole thing as a plot by "left-wingers determined to reverse the election results by forcing Nixon out ... by a process which amounted to a coup d'état." Their motive, Agnew asserted, was "that I was more of a conservative than [Nixon] was on domestic and foreign policy issues."

But it was Nixon, not a band of conspirators, who determined that the vice president had to go. Weary of Agnew's stubborn refusals to step down, in early October Nixon forced him to resign and take a plea bargain. The Baltimore district court, in an act of excessive leniency, fined him \$10,000 and sentenced him to three years of "unsupervised probation." Utilizing the terms of the relatively new Twenty-fifth Amendment, Nixon nominated GOP House minority leader Gerald Ford to be his next vice president. The well-liked and unassuming Ford was approved 92-3 in the Senate, and 387-35 in the House.

Nixon's handling of the Agnew mess further complicated his situation with respect to the Watergate investigation. The *Wall Street Journal* expressed the hope that "Agnew's turnabout would be an inspiration" and that "President Nixon would set aside his own confrontation-prone constitutional battle and agree to release key Watergate tape recordings." Nixon, however, planned

to do no such thing. Still defying the subpoenas, on October 19 he offered to have the tapes reviewed and vetted by Senator John Stennis, a staunch Mississippi conservative. Special Prosecutor Cox, however, rejected the proposal outright. The next night, in what the media dubbed the Saturday Night Massacre, not only was Cox fired, but so, too, were both Attorney General Elliott Richardson and his deputy William Ruckelshaus, both of whom had refused to comply with the president's order to remove Cox. The deed was finally done by Solicitor General Robert Bork.

The Saturday Night Massacre was a turning point. The dismissal of the special prosecutor produced a public outcry, as Nixon's approval rating for the first time slipped below 30 percent. Except for one minor blip in the next month, it would never again top that mark. Nixon attempted to salvage the situation by quickly appointing Ohio senator William Saxbe, an outspoken maverick within the GOP, as attorney general, and Bork named Leon Jaworski, a respected Texas jurist, to follow Cox as special prosecutor. But public outrage could not be so easily quelled. More dangerous for Nixon was the response in the House of Representatives, where the Judiciary Committee launched an inquiry to decide whether the president's actions constituted an impeachable offense.

The decline in Nixon's public standing as a result of the Massacre also led to a new sense of empowerment on the part of Congress in its institutional stand-off with the executive branch. The most resounding evidence of greater legislative boldness came in early November, with passage of the War Powers Resolution over the president's veto. With this action Congress vindicated those who had for so long criticized first Johnson and then Nixon for their arrogance in making war without prior congressional approval. In recognition that presidents would always need some freedom of action in dealing with crises abroad, the act set a sixty-day limit on any commitment of troops before congressional authorization would be explicitly required to maintain their presence. For a president who so jealously guarded his right to control American national security policy, Congress could hardly have inflicted a more punishing blow.

As Nixon tried to engage in more open exchanges with the press and public over the next several months, additional problems piled up. In a mid-November press conference, when asked about the seemingly low federal income taxes he had paid in 1970 and 1971, he revealed that he had taken huge tax deductions for donation of his vice-presidential papers—adding gratuitously, “I am not a crook.” Much of the tax-paying American public drew the opposite conclusion. Finally, he began selectively to provide certain tapes to Judge Sirica and Jaworski—a decision that did him yet more damage. When Sirica became aware that one of the subpoenaed tapes from the critical month of June 1972 had an eighteen-minute gap in it, the media published photos of Nixon’s longtime faithful secretary, Rose Mary Woods, straining to replicate the body position that would have been necessary for her to have accidentally erased that part of the tape, as Nixon had proposed by way of explanation. By January 1974, Nixon’s Operation Candor was a failed experiment and he hunkered down again, trying to figure out how to satisfy the growing pressures for disclosure without giving up the rest of the tapes, which he knew could result in the end of his presidency.

The grand jury’s final set of indictments, handed down on March 1, marked the beginning of the end for the Watergate drama. Four of Nixon’s closest aides—Haldeman, Ehrlichman, Mitchell, and Charles Colson—were among those indicted, and rumors circulated about an “unindicted co-conspirator,” whom all knew to be the president himself. Nixon’s last effort to satisfy those demanding the tapes was to provide transcripts of the conversations. On April 30, he appeared once again on television, this time flanked by over 1200 pages of transcripts, which, he claimed, included everything “relevant” to the investigation. Though the House Judiciary Committee refused to accept them, the transcripts were published in newspapers across the nation and shortly thereafter in both Dell and Bantam paperbacks. If it were possible, the president’s reputation fell even lower as a result of the transcripts, due to the hundreds of instances labeled “expletive deleted.” Among his other failings, it was now clear that the president was given to habitual profanity, often directed toward minority groups.

By the beginning of the summer, the courts, the special prosecutor, and the House Judiciary Committee were closing the net around Nixon. In late July, the Supreme Court ruled in *U.S. v. Nixon* that the White House tapes were public property and the president had to comply with the subpoenas he had refused; by this time, the rest of the tapes hardly mattered. The House committee had prepared five articles of impeachment on the basis of what was already in the record, the first and most potent of which was for obstruction of justice. On separate votes recorded on live television over a three-day period, the committee approved three of the articles. All that remained to be determined now was *how* Nixon's presidency would end—by impeachment or by resignation. After a delegation of Republican dignitaries led by Goldwater visited Nixon in the White House in the late afternoon of August 7, giving him the depressing news that support had all but evaporated in both houses, the president made his decision. At 7:30 p.m., he informed congressional leaders of his decision to resign, and at 9 p.m., he appeared for one final time on prime-time TV, delivering the news to the American public. To the end, Nixon admitted no guilt. "I would say only that if some of my judgments were wrong—and some were wrong," he said earnestly into the cameras, "they were made in what I believed at the time to be the best interests of the nation."

When Richard and Pat Nixon left Washington, D.C., at noon on August 8, making Gerald Ford the thirty-eighth president, it could only be wondered why this superb strategist had allowed himself to be so ensnared. The White House tapes were completely responsible for his fall from power. "Without those tapes," observes Olson, "there would have been no Saturday Night Massacre, no missing conversations, no eighteen-minute erasure, and no smoking gun." Almost no one had known about their existence. Why had Nixon not simply destroyed them, and thereby had nothing to withhold when the subpoenas were issued? The answer seems inescapably simple: Nixon had created the taping system to record what he was certain would be his "historic" achievements in the White House; he had not destroyed



Figure 1.2 Richard Nixon leaving Washington immediately after becoming the only American president to resign from office. © Bettmann/CORBIS

the tapes out of hubris, feeling certain he would be able to outsmart those who were demanding that he give them up. In the end, ironically, this president, more given to secrecy than any of his predecessors, was undone by having to reveal the details of his most private conversations in the White House. Cynicism, secretiveness, and, above all, paranoia about the enemies he vowed to bring down—these were the agents of Nixon's self-destruction.

Just as the Watergate crime and cover-up ruined Richard Nixon and those around him, it also gravely damaged American society. In the end, the politics of cynicism practiced by Richard Nixon produced, as John Robert Greene observes in *The Presidency of Gerald Ford*, a “citizenry made cynical about its destiny.” The political costs of this cynicism would be manifest for the rest of the 1970s, making it virtually impossible for Nixon’s immediate successors to heal the nation’s wounds and restore positive government.