

THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF DEMOCRACY

SEYMOUR MARTIN LIPSET

Editor in Chief

VOLUME I



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 **ROUTLEDGE**
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tolerant and generous, Washington bequeathed a model of republican greatness to the nation that he, first among equals, helped to found.

See also *Revolution, American; United States Constitution; United States of America*.

James R. Stoner, Jr.

Watergate

The American political crisis that began in June 1972, with a burglary at the Democratic campaign headquarters in Washington, D.C. The break-in was organized and funded by Republican president Richard M. Nixon's campaign organization, the Committee to Reelect the President. This political burglary sparked the most critical American constitutional conflict since the Civil War. The crisis ended in August 1974, when President Nixon resigned his office, the first president to do so in the history of the United States. The two-year period tested the fundamental democratic tenet that the legal demands of office must take priority over personal and purely political interests. In the eyes of most observers, American democracy withstood the test.

Watergate must be understood in the context of the 1960s, which in the United States were marked by intense social movements struggling for and against change. The civil rights movement challenged the institutional and cultural foundations of the American South. The youth movement crystallized startlingly different forms of sexual, moral, and community life. These left-wing movements enjoyed great political and cultural success in the mid-1960s. By 1967, however, they had provoked overwhelming resistance, not only because of vested social and cultural interests but because of the polarization generated by the increasingly unpopular Vietnam War. Some officials in the executive branch of the U.S. government tried to restore order through extrademocratic means. Lyndon B. Johnson (president from 1963 to 1969) had secretly authorized extensive spying on left-wing activist groups, and the FBI engaged in disruptive undercover activities and blackmail against leftists.

Backlash movements developed among those whom Richard Nixon later would call "the silent majority," while

movements on the left splintered into moderate and revolutionary groups. In 1968 Nixon rode the backlash movement into office as president. Elements in his administration, and often the president himself, felt themselves under siege by leftist movements who would, they believed, resort to any means necessary to achieve their goals against a legitimately elected conservative regime.

When majority opinion backed by the Constitution refused to allow the administration to wield power in an unconstrained way, some administration officials took the law into their own hands. In the midst of massive public demonstrations disrupting Washington, D.C., Attorney General John Mitchell ordered summary arrests of tens of thousands of activists, an act of repression that was attacked by the nation's leading newspapers and dismissed by its courts. Defying Supreme Court rulings and decades of moral and legal precedent, Mitchell authorized covert wiretapping on the private telephones of opposition leaders and groups.

In the years between 1970 and 1972 the challenges of radical groups declined dramatically. Civil rights demonstrations dwindled, the antiwar movement largely faded away, and the youth culture virtually disappeared in its most visible and socially radical forms. Yet the American public's perception was exactly the opposite: opinion leaders and ordinary citizens alike believed that political and cultural polarization was increasing. George McGovern's selection as the Democratic party candidate in the 1972 presidential election seemed to confirm this perception. An early and outspoken opponent of the Vietnam War, McGovern championed many of the causes of the sixties and brought activists into his campaign. To many members of the Nixon administration, and to a significant number of Americans, the threat to civil society seemed more palpable than ever before.

In June 1971 President Nixon and John D. Ehrlichman, head of the President's Domestic Council, created a small spying operation—the so-called Plumbers—headed by E. Howard Hunt, a former CIA agent, and G. Gordon Liddy, a former FBI agent. In the early months of 1972, at Nixon's suggestion and under the orders of Mitchell, who later became director of Nixon's reelection campaign, this group became the core of a larger clandestine operation whose "dirty tricks" were designed to disrupt and manipulate the Democrats' presidential primary and general election campaigns. On June 17, 1972, five agents of this group were arrested during a burglary at Democratic

campaign headquarters in Washington's Watergate Hotel complex.

By early 1973, after McGovern—the “leftist threat”—had been roundly defeated in the November 1972 election, centrist members of the Senate voted to organize a public investigation of “the Watergate crimes.” Some administration officials who had been involved in the coverup of the break-in acknowledged their wrongdoing and cooperated with the investigation. The most important of these was John Dean, counsel to the president, who prepared damning testimony about Nixon's direct involvement, not only in the Plumbers' operations, dirty tricks, and the Watergate break-in, but also in the bribery, intimidation, and blackmailing that followed.

The Senate hearings, which lasted from May to August 1973, were nationally televised. Suspenseful and dramatic, they garnered a viewing audience of record-breaking size. Senators and witnesses alike evoked the simple yet sacred discourse of American civil society. Alongside accounts of the hidden exercise of public and private power and details of secret money trails, a grand and imposing narrative emerged that drew upon legends about the American nation's earlier times of trial. Once again, foolish, corrupt, and evil men had threatened to destroy the democratic foundations of the nation. The nation's Founders were evoked time and again, and to many viewers Sen. Sam Ervin, the fierce but courtly chair of the committee conducting the hearings, seemed a representation of the Founders in contemporary form. The universal obligations of law and office were enthusiastically confirmed.

Shortly after the conclusion of the hearings, on Saturday, October 20, 1973, President Nixon announced that he had fired Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox and abolished the office that Cox directed. The Office of the Special Prosecutor had been created only months earlier in response to increasing public demands for impartiality and for legal rather than political control. Cox had been pressing Nixon for full disclosure of relevant, possibly incriminating, material from the executive branch. Demonstrating support for Cox's inquiry, Attorney General Eliot Richardson resigned rather than carry out the president's order to fire Cox. Deputy Attorney General William French Smith was fired when he too refused to carry out the president's demand.

In response to what was widely perceived as a constitutional confrontation between democratic obligations and personal power—a confrontation promptly labeled the “Saturday night massacre”—there emerged over that Oc-

tober weekend what reporters called a “firestorm of protest.” Three million angry Americans wrote, called, or telegraphed protests to Washington. Confronted by such an apparently unified public, Nixon rescinded his decision to shut down the special prosecutor's office and appointed Leon Jaworski as Cox's successor.

Facing subpoenas for tape-recorded meetings, injunctions from the special prosecutor's office, and eventually the congressional impeachment procedure itself, President Nixon and his supporters tried to justify their secret and illegal activities by their historical context. They made reference to the polarization of the 1960s and the threats to democracy it had engendered. However, the great civic ritual of Watergate—from the confrontational Senate hearings and the melodramatic Saturday night massacre to the somber, almost funereal impeachment hearings in the House of Representatives—seemed only to confirm that the United States was then, and had always been, a cohesive and civil community.

The crisis actually brought Americans together in an unprecedented way. The specifics of the polarization of the 1960s were forgotten, and the generalized ties so essential to maintaining democracy in complex modern societies were reestablished. Watergate drew a curtain on the period of intense and turbulent social change, creating a kind of public amnesia about how widespread anticivil sentiments had been and how strongly some had felt they required illegal means and intolerant ends in reply.

Scholars disagree about whether Watergate had significant long-term institutional effects. Without doubt, its most important effect was the creation of the Office of the Special Prosecutor, a potentially important vehicle for enforcing the moral obligations of public officials. Yet, though it was utilized on several significant occasions after 1974, the office was never able to regain the image of impartiality or the moral prestige of that earlier time. Proposals to reform campaign financing have been enacted, most conspicuously for presidential campaigns, but they have hardly succeeded in curbing the influence of “big money” on American politics. The War Powers Resolution of 1973 promised to curb presidential power in foreign policy, yet presidentially initiated military interventions have continued unabated. To decry the relative dearth of institutional reforms, however, misses what Watergate was really about. Watergate reached well beyond politics. It was a moral event, a gigantic civics lesson that had no precedent in the history of American political life.

Despite the agonies, duplicities, and political con-

frontations that marked the 1972–1974 period of crisis, polls and interviews at its conclusion confirmed that the process had affirmed, for some four out of five Americans, that theirs was a society built upon justice rather than retribution, that universal moral codes take precedence over personal or material power, that America is less a state, an economy, or a bureaucracy than a community whose members are united by trust, honesty, mutual respect, and the love of truth.

These symbolic, moral lessons of Watergate had profound and relatively long-term effects on American life. Most important, they reinforced trust in democracy, in the constitutional system upon which American government and society rests. At the same time this systemic legitimation had the surprising effect of ensuring that the conservative backlash against movements for liberal social reform would continue in an even more effective way. Separated by the interregnum of Watergate from the polarizing passions of the sixties, conservatism proceeded in a less radical, more moderate and civil way, and in more politically strategic terms, than it had before. Watergate also heightened citizens' distrust of powerful individuals and institutions.

This paradox has led many scholars to conclude that the Watergate crisis had largely negative effects on American democracy, increasing cynicism and undermining the kind of idealistic faith upon which democratic politics depends. The opposite argument can be made, however. Despite the lack of fundamental institutional reform, "post-Watergate morality" continues to exercise a salutary effect on political power in the United States. For Watergate was more than a political and social crisis: it challenged the moral foundations of American democracy itself. The crisis refurbished the mythical dimension of American democracy, the "memory of justice" upon which, Plato believed, the vitality of every experiment in self-government depends.

See also *Impeachment; United States of America*.

Jeffrey C. Alexander

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Weber, Max

A founding thinker of sociology and an important German theorist of the connections between capitalism, bureaucracy, and democracy. Karl Emil Maximilian Weber (1864–1920), as he was christened, suffered from a nervous disorder that forced him to resign his professorship early in a budding academic career. He nevertheless became Germany's most important sociologist and contributed enormously to the rise of modern social science.

Weber is best remembered for his study of how early Protestantism helped generate the cultural basis for modern capitalism. His scholarship also encompassed path-breaking work on the philosophy and methodology of social science, multifaceted conceptual and empirical studies, and sweeping comparative historical research on Eastern and Western societies from antiquity to modern times. He stressed in particular the role of the distinctively rational aspects of Western culture in the rise of modern capitalism, bureaucracy, and democracy. Weber influenced not only conservative and libertarian views of democracy but also the views of progressives and the radical left. His ambivalent vision of "mass democracy" continues to be debated and appropriated in divergent ways today.

Early in his career Weber argued that Germany should follow Britain's path of "liberal imperialism," but he later abandoned this stance. After supporting Germany's entry into World War I, he attacked its territorial annexations and aggressive submarine warfare. Against the prevalent garrison state mentality, he called for a strengthened parliament and a popularly elected chancellor.

Weber held that authoritarian rule had stunted the development of parliamentary institutions and democratic leadership in Germany. Following the war, he helped prepare the German reply to charges of war guilt made at Versailles during the Paris Peace Conference; helped