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Watergate Revisited

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The Watergate years were an exciting time to be a student of American politics. The scandal called into question the integrity of the president and his men, as well as the well-being of the political system itself. Watergate focused the nation's attention on problems whose origins preceded the Nixon Administration: the growth of an "Imperial presidency," the corrupting influence big money has on the electoral process, the extent to which government secrecy fosters illegal and immoral behavior, and the threat our intelligence agencies can pose to civil liberties.

Watergate forced the nation to define terms such as "executive privilege" and "national security," and to decide what constituted an "impeachable offense." Watergate highlighted the power wielded by unelected staff, and it foreshadowed the important force television would become in the political life of the nation.

For these reasons, many faculty may consider teaching a course on Watergate during the spring of 1992, the 20th anniversary of the break-in. The subject can be approached from a variety of perspectives, such as the one I used.

My course had 28 undergraduates and met three hours a day for three weeks during my college's 1991 "Interterm." A typical class had a mix of lecture, videotape, and activity (e.g., either oral reports, discussion, or debate). The course was organized around three question clusters:

- (1) Historical Overview and Constitutional Issues: What happened and why does it matter?
- (2) Explanations of Watergate: Why did Watergate occur? Was Richard Nixon unsuited to the presidency? Is the presidency a flawed office?
- (3) Reform: What are Watergate's lessons? How can we prevent future Watergates from occur-

ring? How did Watergate change America?

I. Historical Overview and Constitutional Issues

Most undergraduates have little knowledge of Watergate. We spent the first week of class on historical overview and a chronology of the crisis. I began by showing the film "All the President's Men," which

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served several purposes. It wetted the students' appetites by capturing the scandal's drama. It provided a good introduction and overview, and it introduced many of the characters involved in the scandal. Finally, it is one of the few movies that provides an accurate portrayal of how major newspapers actually work.

Classroom discussion focused on the *Washington Post's* motives: economic (Did the *Post* cover the scandal to boost its circulation and attract more advertisers?); journalistic (Did Woodward and Bernstein see themselves as "watchdogs," checks on corrupt government officials? Did they want to scoop the *New York Times* and CBS News, and perhaps win a Pulitzer Prize in the process?); or political (Was the *Post* out to get the president because, as the White House suggested, their editor, Benjamin Bradlee, was a liberal Democrat, and Nixon was a conservative Republican?).

Readings

A number of fine books have been written about Watergate, such as

Sam Ervin's *The Whole Truth*, or Barry Sussman's *The Great Coverup*. The problem is that most, including these two, are out of print. (See Myron J. Smith's *Watergate: Annotated Bibliography of Sources in English, 1972-1982* for suggested titles.) I decided to go with Jonathan Schell's excellent *The Time of Illusion*, which provides a thoughtful and comprehensive account of the period leading up to and including the coverup, and a powerful thesis—that the Watergate scandal was a result of the government's efforts to suppress opposition to the war in Vietnam.

Videotapes

There are a number of excellent videotapes on Watergate available through the Public Broadcasting System (PBS). *Summer of Judgement* includes highlights from the televised Senate Watergate Committee's hearings. Students found the testimony of John Dean, John Mitchell, Bob Haldeman, and John Erlichman, as well as the humor and insight of Sam Ervin, as riveting today as the nation did during the summer of 1973. The followup *Summer of Judgement: The Impeachment Hearings* includes highlights from the televised House Judiciary Committee's deliberations on articles of impeachment. It also includes reflective interviews with Republican and Democratic members of the committee and its staff. In a particularly moving scene one of Nixon's staunchest supporters, Representative Caldwell Butler (R-VA), whose district had voted for Nixon by 73% in the 1972 election, weeps as he recalls how wrenching it was to vote for impeachment—important evidence given the Nixon Administration's charge that the Judiciary Committee's hearings were a partisan witch hunt. Many of my students were surprised to see Congress function as well as it did during these hearings.

Oral Reports

Each student did a 10-minute oral report on one of the individuals involved in the scandal. These reports helped fill out the narrative and stimulated important discussions. For example, a report on Dita Beard (the lobbyist who helped arrange a large contribution to the Nixon campaign in return for the Justice Department's decision to drop an antitrust investigation of International Telephone and Telegraph Corporation) led to important discussions about the role of money in the electoral process. Reports on John Mitchell, Tom Huston (author of the infamous "Huston" plan), and G. Gordon Liddy raised questions about the power of unelected staff and the abuse of civil liberties that occurred during the 1960s and 1970s as well as the state of civil liberties today. (E.g., when is it O.K. for the government to wiretap or spy on an individual?).

One of Watergate's most important lessons concerns individual ethics. The president and his men were intelligent and well-educated people. Many of them were very young (John Dean was only 34 when he testified before the Ervin Committee). How did so many people who came to do good, end up committing crimes, crimes for which many of them (though not all) received fines and prison sentences? What exactly is the process by which a person becomes corrupted?

The take-home midterm asked students to write a history of Watergate and to evaluate Congress's handling of the scandal.

II. Explanations of Watergate

The second week of the course focused on alternative explanations of the Watergate crisis. The first explanation focused on the "Man," the second on the Office. James David Barber's *Presidential Character* (selected chapters) coupled with PBS's three-part series on Richard Nixon (*The American Experience: Nixon*) were used. Barber's well-known topology of presidential personality provides a theoretical basis for discussing one of the most important political actors in Ameri-

can politics in this century, as well as the electoral system that attracts and rewards individuals who may not belong in the White House. Barber's chapters on Nixon (including his famous prediction that Nixon would self-destruct during his second term) and the PBS tape provide ample material for an intriguing discussion concerning the qualities a potential president ought to have.¹

For the "Institutional" explanations I based my lectures on Bruce Buchanan's *The Presidential Experience* and Irving Janis's *Groupthink*. Both books focus on the psychological environment of the presidency and the deleterious impact it can have on decision-making. Since the Buchanan book is out of print, I lectured from it and assigned Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's *The Final Days*. The Buchanan book argues that the office of the presidency exposes all presidents to psychological pressures (unusual levels of stress, frustration, dissonance, and deference, which are associated with the roles of symbol, policy advocate, crisis manager, and conflict mediator) that can grind on presidents and wear them down. *The Final Days* provides graphic evidence of the psychological strain Nixon was experiencing in the last days of his presidency.²

Trip to the Nixon Library

This course was unusual in that we had access to the Nixon Library and Museum, which is located in Yorba Linda, California. The library (as yet there are no books or materials) has a 30-minute film on Nixon's life and a series of exhibits based on his political career. It is the only presidential library that is privately owned and operated. Students wrote a short paper that assessed the accuracy and fairness of the Watergate exhibit. Our visit to the library provided the students with the opportunity to sharpen their critical thinking skills. As one of my students said, "This looks like another cover-up."

Here is a sample of what the Nixon film and other Watergate exhibits have to say about the president's involvement in the scandal to the hundreds of thousands of citizens

who are expected to visit the library each year:

But even as prospects for peace were brightening around the world, a shadow was falling. On June 17, 1972, at the Watergate complex in Washington, D.C., five men were caught breaking into the offices of the Democratic National Committee. The President knew nothing about this. But in the months that followed some of his aides became involved in a cover-up of the incident which led to their resignations. Finally, the shadow fell across the Presidency itself. Accused of complicity in the coverup, Nixon bore the burden of defending himself and trying to govern during a time of crisis. Even in the depths of Watergate, during the Yom Kippur War, Nixon acted boldly to save Israel from defeat and keep the Soviets out of the Middle East. At last, threatened with impeachment, he made his decision.

Watergate is a word that has come to mean many things to many people. What it was before June 17, 1972, was a luxury apartment, office and hotel complex in Washington, D.C. What it became in the course of the next 26 months was a catch word for every misjudgment, miscalculation, and crime, imagined or real, that had ever been contemplated by anyone even remotely connected with the Nixon Administration. . . . Nixon was fighting against those who sought to reverse the stunning mandate he had received from the voters on November 7, 1972. At the time commentators sought to portray Watergate strictly as a morality play, as a struggle between right and wrong, truth and falsehood, good and evil. Given the benefit of time, it is now clear that Watergate was an epic and bloody political battle, fought for the highest stakes, with no holds barred. President Nixon's reputation and ability to govern was the battlefield. Control of the direction the nation would take as it entered its third century was the prize. Nixon himself said he made inexcusable misjudgments during Watergate. But what is equally clear is that his political opponents ruthlessly exploited these misjudgments as a way to further their own purely political goals.

III. Reform

The final section of the class focused on the political reforms enacted as a result of the scandal by the federal government and by many

state governments. At the federal level these reforms included the *Federal Campaign Act Amendments*, the *Ethics in Government Act*, and the *FBI Domestic Security Investigation Guidelines*. I based my lectures on a short and inexpensive publication by Common Cause called *The Watergate Reforms: Ten Years Later*. This section of the course focused on Watergate's lessons and how the scandal changed the nation. Discussion topics included: Is the president above the law? Does Watergate demonstrate that the system worked? Have presidents since Nixon been more honest, or simply more careful? This led very nicely into a discussion of the Iran-Contra affair. The final examination asked students to explain why Watergate occurred and to assess the strengths and weaknesses of our political system.

IV. Conclusion

The Watergate scandal is a compelling narrative through which many

of the most important issues in American government can be addressed. The scandal profoundly altered the role of the press, the laws that govern the electoral process, and, for a time, public opinion regarding presidential power and the balance of power between Congress and the president. Watergate raises intriguing and enduring questions. It also arouses strong passions—key ingredients of a successful course.³

Notes

1. The third hour of this series is devoted solely to Watergate and provides a thorough overview of the scandal.

2. An excellent made-for-TV film of *The Final Days* which was shown on public television is available from Greenstreet Productions, c/o Complete Post, Inc., 6087 Sunset Blvd., Hollywood, CA 90028.

3. A course syllabus may be obtained by writing the author at the Department of Political Science, Chapman University, Orange, CA 92666.

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About the Author

Fred Smoller is an associate professor of political science at Chapman University. He is the author of *The Six O'Clock Presidency: A Theory of Presidential Press Relations in the Age of Television* (Praeger Press, 1990).

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