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What was Watergate?

The June 17, 1972, burglary that became a constitutional crisis

(CNN) -- Initially dismissed by the White House as a "third-rate burglary," the June 17, 1972, break-in at Democratic National Committee headquarters mushroomed into a constitutional crisis that led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon.

The scandal began during the run-up to that year's presidential election, when Democratic Sen. George McGovern was running against Nixon. Five men were arrested at DNC's headquarters at the Watergate office-hotel-apartment complex in Washington.

The men were at DNC headquarters to photograph key documents and replace eavesdropping equipment installed during a previous break-in.

A Watergate security guard, Frank Wills, discovered them and called the police, who arrested the five men at gunpoint in the DNC offices.

The burglars were found to be part of the "plumbers," a White House unit set up to investigate leaks of sensitive information after the release of the Pentagon Papers.

One of the burglars, retired CIA employee James McCord, was employed by the Committee to Re-elect the President as a security consultant.

Ron Ziegler, the White House press secretary, downplayed the break-in as a "third-rate burglary."

The White House went to great lengths publicly to distance the president from the burglars and their two bosses, E. Howard Hunt, a former CIA operative and White House consultant, and G. Gordon Liddy, a former FBI agent who worked for the re-election committee.

Initially the scandal had little effect. Nixon was re-elected that November in a landslide, winning 61 percent of the popular vote over McGovern.

But in the months after his second inauguration, FBI agents, journalists and congressional investigations began to piece together details of the scandal that pointed to White House involvement.

'Deep throat'

Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, two reporters for The Washington Post, pursued the story immediately after the break-in.

The two reporters filed groundbreaking stories on Watergate and were aided by a source known as "Deep Throat" who was not revealed as W. Mark Felt until May 31, 2005. ([Full story](#))

The reporters' work eventually won the Post the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service and ensured their place in journalism history.

"It was not about a break-in, a single break-in. It was about a pattern of illegal activities involving beating up members of the political opposition physically, stealing their memos, wiretapping political opponents, breaking into offices of psychiatrists, firebombing think tanks," Bernstein told CNN in 2003.

In January 1973, the burglars, Liddy and Hunt went on trial. Four of the burglars and Hunt ended their trials by pleading guilty. Liddy and McCord were convicted of conspiracy and burglary charges.

The trial was followed in February by a 77-0 vote in the Senate to create a special investigative committee to look into Watergate.

The scandal deepened when U.S. District Judge John Sirica, who presided over the trials of the burglars, released in March 1973 a letter written to him by McCord in which McCord claimed perjury was committed during the trial and that White House officials had pressured the defendants to plead guilty.

As the scandal progressed, many Nixon administration officials linked to the break-in and cover-up were convicted of charges relating to Watergate.

The list included John Mitchell, Nixon's onetime campaign chairman and former attorney general; former White House chief of staff H.R. Haldeman; John Dean, Nixon's White House counsel; and John Ehrlichman, Nixon's domestic policy adviser.

Then on July 13, 1973, a White House aide named Alexander Butterfield told the Senate committee's staff members about the taping system that recorded Nixon's Oval Office conversations. Three days later, the revelation became public in a televised hearing.

That set off a battle between the White House and Congress and the administration's own special prosecutor over the release of tapes made on crucial days following the break-in and later.

Archibald Cox, who was appointed special Watergate prosecutor in May 1973, subpoenaed the tapes but Nixon refused.

In what became known as the "Saturday Night Massacre," Solicitor General Robert Bork fired Cox in October 1973 at Nixon's order.

Bork fired Cox only because Attorney General Elliot Richardson and Deputy Attorney General William Ruckelshaus quit rather than obey the president.

The ensuing uproar only increased demands in Congress that Nixon be impeached. Nixon replaced Cox with Texas attorney Leon Jaworski and agreed to release some of the subpoenaed tapes.

But one of the tapes included a mysterious 18.5-minute erased gap and the White House claimed two other tapes were missing.

On February 6, 1974, the House of Representatives authorized the Judiciary Committee to investigate grounds for impeachment.

In April 1974, the White House released more than 1,200 pages of edited transcripts of the Oval Office tapes. But the administration still refused to turn over the actual tapes to the House Judiciary Committee, citing executive privilege.

The 'smoking gun'

But on July 24, 1974 -- 25 months after the break-in -- the Supreme Court unanimously ruled the White House must turn over more audiotapes. Three days later, the House Judiciary Committee passed the first of three articles of impeachment.

Nixon then released the tapes six days later. On one tape was the so-called "smoking gun," showing that six days after the break-in Nixon had tried to use the CIA to block the FBI investigation of the burglary.

The tape connected Nixon directly to the burglary, a fact he had long denied, including his famous quote, "I am not a crook." The minimal support Nixon had in Congress disappeared.

On August 8, he announced his resignation, effective at noon the next day, without admitting any guilt.

"Always remember, others may hate you, but those who hate you don't win unless you hate them, and then you destroy yourself," he said in his farewell address to the White House staff on August 9.

Nixon left the White House and flew to California. Vice President Gerald Ford was sworn in immediately after Nixon's departure. He told the nation that "our long national nightmare is over."

The effects of Watergate did not ease quickly or easily. A month later, Ford pardoned Nixon "for all offenses against the United States" he had committed "or may have committed" in office, stirring up further controversy.

For more than 30 years, speculation continued over the identity of Deep Throat. According to Woodward and Bernstein, the only other person who knew the identity was Benjamin C. Bradlee, who was executive editor of the Post at the time.

The two reporters said they had an agreement to reveal Deep Throat's identity upon his death.

But their source, W. Mark Felt, decided not to wait. He revealed his role in Watergate during an interview with Vanity Fair magazine and his account was confirmed by the Post.

Since Watergate, there have been other revelations as new tapes of Nixon's conversations are released.

"You know, one of the things about Watergate and one of the things about the Nixon presidency is that it just keeps going. It never ends," Bernstein said in 2003.

"There are tapes from the grave, from the president of the United States, far worse than anything we ever heard, anti-Semitic remarks, more break-ins. It's absolutely *sui generis* in our history, including these continuing revelations," he said.

"It's one of the reasons that the country is constantly as fascinated by Nixon and by Nixonia, of which Watergate is a huge part."

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