

The Watergate Scandal

What were the main events of the Watergate Scandal and how did it discredit Richard Nixon? (10 marks)

On 17th June 1972 five "burglars" were arrested in the offices of the Democratic Party in the Watergate building. Although the men had large amounts of money and were carrying bugging equipment, the case aroused little interest, yet it was the break in and the desperate attempts to cover it up which gave its name to the scandal and ultimately toppled Nixon.

The connection between the Watergate burglary and the President's re-election campaign fundraising committee was highlighted by media coverage of the break-in. In particular, investigative coverage by ~~the Washington Post~~ ~~the Washington Post~~ focused on the event. The coverage dramatically increased the profile of the crime and consequent political stakes. Fed tips by an anonymous source, Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein uncovered information suggesting that knowledge of the break-in and attempts to cover it up led deep into the Justice Department and even the White House itself. Rather than ending with the trial and conviction of the burglars, the investigations grew broader; and a Senate committee chaired by Senator Sam Ervin was set up to examine Watergate. Nixon still denied any knowledge or involvement.

The most significant fact to emerge from the senate investigation was that since 1971, Nixon had secretly taped conversations in his office in the White House; however Nixon refused to hand them over to the Senate Committee investigating the matter. The issue of access to the tapes went all the way to the Supreme Court. On July 24, 1974, in ~~United States v. Nixon~~ ~~United States v. Nixon~~, the Court ruled unanimously that claims of executive privilege over the tapes were void, and they further ordered him to surrender them. On July 30, he complied with the order and released the tapes and included in the collection was the so-called "Smoking Gun" tape, in which Nixon is heard discussing the break in and cover up in June 1972. To avoid being impeached, Nixon resigned on 8th August 1974.

The scandal revealed the existence of a White House dirty tricks squad, an enemies list, a plumbers unit to plug leaks and a secret campaign slush fund associated with the Committee for the Re-election of the President (CRP), all with high level administration involvement. It brought into the open the involvement of the Attorney General, John N. Mitchell, in the dirty tricks, funds and cover up, as well as key White House advisors, all of whom went to prison for these crimes.

The Watergate Scandal overshadows everything else in Nixon's presidency and utterly destroyed his reputation. He was seen as corrupt and untrustworthy. People called him "Tricky Dicky". Any achievements of his presidency seemed insignificant.

However, the deeper damage of the Watergate Scandal was it undermined confidence in politics. It seemed as if political leadership had been replaced by cynical manipulation and some people could not believe that such events were taking place in the USA. The confidence and idealism of the 1960s were replaced by doubt and cynicism of politics. The scandal started with a small revelation but gradually snowballed into a constitutional crisis.