

Fifty years since the resignation of Richard Nixon

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Fifty years ago today, Republican President Richard Nixon resigned from office, as the Watergate scandal had entirely undermined the viability of his administration. The last straw was the release of tape recordings of White House conversations in which Nixon could be heard telling his top aides to have the CIA block an FBI investigation into the Watergate break-in by falsely claiming concerns over “national security.”

The break-in at the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee in the Watergate complex in Washington D.C. took place on June 17, 1972, as Nixon was running for reelection against the Democratic presidential nominee, Senator George McGovern. The five burglars, all former CIA employees, were now working for Nixon’s reelection campaign. They were dispatched on their intelligence-gathering mission by two White House officials, E. Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy, who had been hired by Nixon to conduct secret investigations and carry out “dirty tricks” against his critics and political opponents.

After Nixon’s landslide reelection, the investigation into the Watergate break-in began to close in on the White House. Hunt, Liddy and the five burglars were convicted and threatened with long prison sentences. White House Counsel John Dean began to cooperate with the investigation. Top Nixon aides H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman resigned, along with Attorney General Richard Kleindeinst.

The discovery that Nixon had secretly had a taping system installed in the Oval Office that recorded his conversations with aides touched off a legal and political firestorm. When Watergate Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox pushed for access to the tapes, Nixon fired him, and Attorney General Eliot Richardson and his deputy, William Ruckelshaus, resigned in protest, in what became known as the “Saturday night massacre.”

Nixon was forced to name a new Watergate prosecutor, Leon Jaworski, who obtained grand jury indictments of seven former top Nixon administration officials on criminal charges relating to the break-in and cover-up, with Nixon himself named as an “unindicted co-conspirator.”

Finally, on July 24, 1974, a unanimous US Supreme Court ruled in *United States v. Nixon* that the president’s claim of “executive privilege” to safeguard the privacy of his conversations with top aides had to give way to the right of the Watergate special prosecutor to pursue his criminal investigation. The court decision was quickly followed by the House Judiciary Committee adopting articles of impeachment.

Once released, the tapes provided damning evidence of Nixon’s role in directing the Watergate cover-up. A delegation of top congressional

Republicans visited the White House to tell the president he would be impeached, convicted by the Senate, and removed from office.

On the night of August 8, 1974, Nixon gave a nationally televised speech announcing he would step down, and the following day he resigned and was succeeded by Vice President Gerald Ford.

The Watergate scandal was itself part of a larger, decade-long political crisis in the United States, which included the 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy, in which the role of agencies like the CIA was covered up; the mass movement for civil rights in the South combined with urban rebellions by black workers and youth; the mass protests against the Vietnam War; and a powerful wages offensive by the American working class.

The crisis reached the breaking point with the tumultuous events of 1968—the Tet offensive in Vietnam, the announcement by President Lyndon Johnson that he would not seek reelection, the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, the police violence against antiwar protesters outside the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, and finally the election of Nixon, who claimed to possess a “secret plan” to end the war, but actually continued the bloodbath for another four years.

Throughout his first term, Nixon and his closest collaborators were terrified of the growth of mass opposition at home, particularly from young people and the working class. After one antiwar demonstration brought a million people to Washington in November 1969, then-Attorney General John Mitchell told his wife Martha the scenes in the streets were “like the Russian Revolution” and the critics of the war were “worse than communists.”

Similar fears of a political upheaval from below—not his milksop opponents in the Democratic Party—were at the root of Nixon’s illegal actions in Watergate.

Throughout the Watergate crisis, the Workers League, forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party (US), published detailed reports on the crisis and advanced the demand for an independent political movement of the working class to force Nixon out of office. We said that the working class should not allow the American bourgeoisie to resolve the crisis through methods that protected its political monopoly (the two-party system) and the repressive institutions of the capitalist state.

After Ford took office and declared the end of “our long national nightmare,” he pardoned Nixon so that there would be no further exposure of his crimes. The representatives of big business in the Democratic and Republican parties and the corporate media heaved a sigh of relief. “The system works,” they declared.

This was premature, to say the least. While Watergate marked the first really significant turn by an American president to criminal

methods to undermine fundamental constitutional procedures, it was not to be the last. Driven by a deepening economic crisis, the American ruling class continually turned to violent and authoritarian methods to attack the working class and threaten democratic rights.

Democratic President Jimmy Carter sought to crush the national strike of coal miners in 1978 through the invocation of the Taft-Hartley Act. He failed, but his action prepared the ground for Ronald Reagan's mass firing of 11,000 striking air traffic controllers, members of the union known as PATCO, in August 1981.

In 1986-87, the eruption of the Iran-Contra scandal directly implicated the Reagan White House in a conspiracy to violate a law banning aid to the fascist "contra" death squads engaged in a terrorist war against the left-nationalist Sandinista government in Nicaragua. The director of this operation, Lt. Col. Oliver North, was also in charge of preparing secret plans to round up political opponents in the event of a full-scale war in Central America. Rather than impeach or prosecute Reagan, the Democrats in Congress covered up his responsibility and the wider implications of the state conspiracy against democratic rights.

With the election of Democrat Bill Clinton in the 1992, the Republican Party made use of a special prosecutor not to investigate crimes, but to manufacture evidence to support a political coup. An investigation into Whitewater, a failed real estate investment in Arkansas, was eventually transformed into a salacious probe of Clinton's personal life, culminating in his impeachment in 1998.

While the Senate refused to convict, the impeachment set the stage for the stolen election of 2000, in which the Supreme Court voted 5-4 in *Bush v. Gore* to award the presidency to George W. Bush by ending the counting of ballots in Florida. This extraordinary decision was not contested by the Democratic Party.

Many of the arguments and procedures used by the Republicans to steal the election, though confined to the state of Florida, anticipated the methods used by Trump and the Republican Party nationwide in 2020. Justice Antonin Scalia argued in *Bush v. Gore* that nothing in the Constitution gave the American people the right to elect the president. The state legislatures, he claimed, had the right to select presidential electors without any regard for the outcome of the popular vote.

With Trump's attempted coup of 2020-2021, the longstanding crisis of American democracy reached a new and explosive point of intensity. Trump declared that he would not respect the results of the election unless they showed he had won.

After his loss, by the wide margin of seven million votes, he refused to concede and redoubled his plotting to overturn the result. On January 6, 2021, Trump instigated a violent assault on the Capitol by his supporters, seeking to block congressional certification of his election defeat.

The events of 2024 mark a further milestone in the breakdown of American democracy. The institutions that supposedly saved the country in 1974 are now aligned with the would-be dictator. The Republican Party, which told Nixon in 1974 there was no way out, is today nothing more than an instrument of the fascist Trump cult.

The Supreme Court, which voted unanimously against a dictator-president in 1974, voted 6-3 on July 1 to uphold Trump's claims of immunity from any legal repercussions for his actions. The court majority ruled that any order given by a president to his executive branch subordinates—such as the instructions Nixon gave to Haldeman, Ehrlichman and the CIA in 1974—is presumptively immune from prosecution. When a dissenting justice observed that a

president so empowered could order the murder of a political rival or a military coup with impunity, the majority dismissed her concern.

In 1974, Justice William Rehnquist, a hard-line reactionary, recused himself from the 8-0 decision in *United States v. Nixon* because of his role as a former Nixon administration official. In 2024, Clarence Thomas and Samuel Alito refused to recuse themselves in the pro-Trump vote, although Thomas's wife played a material role in the January 6 coup attempt, while Alito was preparing to issue a court ruling backing the coup in the event that it succeeded.

As for the Democratic Party, its priority is to continue and escalate the US-NATO war with Russia in Ukraine, to back Israeli genocide in Gaza and prepare for war with Iran, and to continue the US military buildup in the Asia-Pacific against China. This is the driving force of all its maneuvers this year, now culminating in the withdrawal of President Biden from the race, the elevation of Vice President Kamala Harris as the presidential nominee, and her selection of Minnesota Governor Tim Walz—a 24-year military veteran and supporter of the wars in Ukraine and Gaza—as her running mate.

In his first interview since stepping down as the Democratic nominee, President Biden told CBS this week that he is "not confident at all" that there will be a peaceful transfer of power in January 2025 if Trump is defeated in the November election. Trump himself has maintained that he will only recognize an outcome that is "fair," i.e., in which he is declared the winner.

Biden's statement is both an admission of political reality and a declaration of political bankruptcy. For the three years that followed the January 6 coup, Biden and the Democrats blocked any serious effort to bring Trump to justice for his crimes, seeing as their main priorities preserving the capitalist two-party system and securing the collaboration of the Republicans in a bipartisan program of war against Russia and China. Through their reactionary attacks on the living standards, jobs and democratic rights of American working people, they are responsible for the revival of the fascist demagogue's political standing.

(For a more detailed examination of these events, see this writer's analysis of June 6, 2005: *Watergate in historical perspective: Why does today's criminal White House face no similar challenge?*)



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