As Senator Sam Ervin completed his 20-year Senate career in 1974 and issued his final report as chairman of the Senate Watergate committee, he posed the question: “What was Watergate?”

Countless answers have been offered in the 40 years since June 17, 1972, when a team of burglars wearing business suits and rubber gloves was arrested at 2:30 A.M. at the headquarters of the Democratic Party in the Watergate office building in Washington. Four days afterward, the Nixon White House offered its answer: “Certain elements may try to stretch this beyond what it was,” press secretary Ronald Ziegler scoffed, dismissing the incident as a “third-rate burglary.”

History proved that it was anything but. Two years later, Richard Nixon would become the first and only U.S. president to resign, his role in the criminal conspiracy to obstruct justice—the Watergate cover-up—definitively established.

Another answer has since persisted, often unchallenged: the notion that the cover-up was worse than the crime. This idea minimizes the scale and reach of Nixon’s criminal actions.

Ervin’s answer to his own question hints at the magnitude of Watergate: “To destroy, insofar as the presidential election of 1972 was concerned, the integrity of the process by which the President of the United States is nominated and elected.” Yet Watergate was far more than that. At its most virulent, Watergate was a brazen and daring assault, led by Nixon himself, against the heart of American democracy: the Constitution, our system of free elections, the rule of law.
Today, much more than when we first covered this story as young *Washington Post* reporters, an abundant record provides unambiguous answers and evidence about Watergate and its meaning. This record has expanded continuously over the decades with the transcription of hundreds of hours of Nixon’s secret tapes, adding detail and context to the hearings in the Senate and House of Representatives; the trials and guilty pleas of some 40 Nixon aides and associates who went to jail; and the memoirs of Nixon and his deputies. Such documentation makes it possible to trace the president’s personal dominance over a massive campaign of political espionage, sabotage, and other illegal activities against his real or perceived opponents.

In the course of his five-and-a-half-year presidency, beginning in 1969, Nixon launched and managed five successive and overlapping wars—against the anti–Vietnam War movement, the news media, the Democrats, the justice system, and, finally, against history itself. All reflected a mindset and a pattern of behavior that were uniquely and pervasively Nixon’s: a willingness to disregard the law for political advantage, and a quest for dirt and secrets about his opponents as an organizing principle of his presidency.

Long before the Watergate break-in, gumshoeing, burglary, wiretapping, and political sabotage had become a way of life in the Nixon White House.

What was Watergate? It was Nixon’s five wars.

**1. The war against the antiwar movement**

Nixon’s first war was against the anti–Vietnam War movement. The president considered it subversive and thought it constrained his ability to prosecute the war in Southeast Asia on his terms. In 1970, he approved the top secret Huston Plan, authorizing the CIA, the FBI, and military intelligence units to intensify electronic surveillance of individuals identified as “domestic security threats.” The plan called for, among other things, intercepting mail and lifting restrictions on “surreptitious entry”—that is, break-ins or “black bag jobs.”

Thomas Charles Huston, the White House aide who devised the plan, informed Nixon that it was illegal, but the president approved it regardless. It was not formally rescinded until FBI director J. Edgar Hoover objected—not on principle, but because he considered those types of activities the FBI’s turf. Undeterred, Nixon remained fixated on such operations.

In a memorandum dated March 3, 1970, presidential aide Patrick Bu-
chanan wrote to Nixon about what he called the “institutionalized power of the left concentrated in the foundations that succor the Democratic Party.” Of particular concern was the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank with liberal leanings.

On June 17, 1971—exactly one year before the Watergate break-in—Nixon met in the Oval Office with his chief of staff, H. R. “Bob” Haldeman, and national security adviser Henry Kissinger. At issue was a file about former president Lyndon Johnson’s handling of the 1968 bombing halt in Vietnam.

“You can blackmail Johnson on this stuff, and it might be worth doing,” Haldeman said, according to the tape of the meeting.

“Yeah,” Kissinger said, “but Bob and I have been trying to put the damn thing together for three years.” They wanted the complete story of Johnson’s actions.


Nixon would not let the matter drop. Thirteen days later, according to another taped discussion with Haldeman and Kissinger, the president said: “Break in and take it out. You understand?”

The next morning, Nixon said: “Bob, get on the Brookings thing right away. I’ve got to get that safe cracked over there.” And later that morning, he persisted, “Who’s gonna break in the Brookings Institution?”

For reasons that have never been made clear, the break-in apparently was not carried out.

2. The war on the news media

Nixon’s second war was waged ceaselessly against the press, which was reporting more insistently on the faltering Vietnam War and the effectiveness of the antiwar movement. Although Hoover thought he had shut down the Huston Plan, it was in fact implemented by high-level Nixon deputies. A “Plumbers” unit and burglary team were set up under the direction of Nixon’s chief domestic adviser John Ehrlichman and an assistant, Egil Krogh, and led by the operational chiefs of the future Watergate burglary, ex-CIA operative Howard Hunt and former FBI agent G. Gordon Liddy. Hunt was hired as a consultant by Nixon political aide Charles Colson, whose take-no-prisoners sensibility matched the president’s.
An early assignment was to destroy the reputation of Daniel Ellsberg, who had provided the Pentagon Papers, a secret history of the Vietnam War, to the news media in 1971. Publication of the documents in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and eventually other newspapers had sent Nixon into rants and rages, recorded on his tapes, about Ellsberg, the antiwar movement, the press, Jews, the American left, and liberals in Congress—all of whom he conflated. Though Ellsberg was already under indictment and charged with espionage, the team headed by Hunt and Liddy broke into the office of his psychiatrist, seeking information that might smear Ellsberg and undermine his credibility in the antiwar movement.

“You can’t drop it, Bob,” Nixon told Haldeman on June 29, 1971. “You can’t let the Jew steal that stuff and get away with it. You understand?”

He went on: “People don’t trust these Eastern establishment people. He’s Harvard. He’s a Jew. You know, and he’s an arrogant intellectual.”

Nixon’s anti-Semitic rages were well known to those who worked most closely with him, including some aides who were Jewish. As we reported in our 1976 book, *The Final Days*, he would tell his deputies, including Kissinger, that “the Jewish cabal is out to get me.” In a July 3, 1971, conversation with Haldeman, he said: “The government is full of Jews. Second, most Jews are disloyal. You know what I mean? You have a Garment [White House counsel Leonard Garment] and a Kissinger and, frankly, a Safire [presidential speechwriter William Safire], and, by God, they’re exceptions. But Bob, generally speaking, you can’t trust the bastards. They turn on you.”

Ellsberg’s leak seemed to feed his prejudice and paranoia.

In response to suspected leaks to the press about Vietnam, Kissinger had ordered FBI wiretaps in 1969 on the telephones of 17 journalists and White House aides, without court approval. Many news stories based on the purported leaks questioned progress in the American war effort, further fueling the antiwar movement. In a tape from the Oval Office on February 22, 1971, Nixon said, “In the short run, it would be so much easier, wouldn’t it, to run this war in a dictatorial way, kill all the reporters and carry on the war.”

“The press is your enemy,” Nixon explained five days later in a meeting with Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, according to another tape. “Enemies. Understand that? . . . Now, never act that way . . . give them a drink, you know, treat them nice, you just love
it, you’re trying to be helpful. But don’t help the bastards. Ever. Because they’re trying to stick the knife right in our groin.”

3. The war against the Democrats

In Nixon’s third war, he took the weapons in place—the Plumbers, wiretapping, and burglary—and deployed them against the Democrats challenging his reelection.

John N. Mitchell, Nixon’s campaign manager and confidant, met with Liddy at the Justice Department in early 1972, when Mitchell was attorney general. Liddy presented a $1 million plan, code-named “Gemstone,” for spying and sabotage during the upcoming presidential campaign.

According to the Senate Watergate report and Liddy’s 1980 autobiography, he used multicolored charts prepared by the CIA to describe elements of the plan. Operation Diamond would neutralize antiwar protesters with mugging squads and kidnapping teams; Operation Coal would funnel cash to Representative Shirley Chisholm, a black congresswoman from Brooklyn seeking the Democratic presidential nomination, in an effort to sow racial and gender discord in the party; Operation Opal would use electronic surveillance against various targets, including the headquarters of Democratic presidential candidates Edmund Muskie and George McGovern; Operation Sapphire would station prostitutes on a yacht, wired for sound, off Miami Beach during the Democratic National Convention.

Mitchell rejected the plans and told Liddy to burn the charts. At a second meeting, less than three weeks later, Liddy presented a scaled-back, $500,000 version of the plan; Mitchell turned it down again. But soon after, Mitchell approved a $250,000 version, according to Jeb Magruder, the deputy campaign manager. It included intelligence gathering on the Democrats through wiretaps and burglaries.

Under oath, Mitchell later denied approving the plan. He testified that he told Magruder: “We don’t need this. I’m tired of hearing it.” By his own account, he did not object on the grounds that the plan was illegal.

On October 10, 1972, we wrote a story in the Post outlining the extensive sabotage and spying operations of the Nixon campaign and White House, particularly against Muskie, and stating that the Watergate burglary was not an isolated event. The story said that at least 50 operatives had been involved in the espionage and sabotage, many of them under the direction of a young California lawyer named Donald Segretti; several days later, we
reported that Segretti had been hired by Dwight Chapin, Nixon’s appointments secretary. (The Senate Watergate committee later found more than 50 saboteurs, including 22 who were paid by Segretti.) Herbert Kalmbach, Nixon’s personal attorney, paid Segretti more than $43,000 from leftover campaign funds for these activities. Throughout the operation, Segretti was contacted regularly by Howard Hunt.

The Senate investigation provided more detail about the effectiveness of the covert efforts against Muskie, who in 1971 and early 1972 was considered by the White House to be the Democrat most capable of beating Nixon. The president’s campaign paid Muskie’s chauffeur, a campaign volunteer named Elmer Wyatt, $1,000 a month to photograph internal memos, position papers, schedules, and strategy documents, and deliver copies to Mitchell and Nixon’s campaign staff.

Other sabotage directed at Muskie included bogus news releases and allegations of sexual improprieties against other Democratic candidates—produced on counterfeit Muskie stationery. A favored dirty trick that caused havoc at campaign stops involved sweeping up the shoes that Muskie aides left in hotel hallways to be polished, and then depositing them in a dumpster.

Haldeman, the White House chief of staff, advised Nixon of the Chapin-Segretti sabotage plan in May 1971, according to one of the president’s tapes. In a memo to Haldeman and Mitchell dated April 12, 1972, Patrick Buchanan and another Nixon aide wrote: “Our primary objective, to prevent Senator Muskie from sweeping the early primaries, locking up the convention in April, and uniting the Democratic Party behind him for the fall, has been achieved.”

The tapes also reveal Nixon’s obsession with another Democrat: Senator Edward Kennedy. One of Hunt’s earliest undertakings for the White House was to dig up dirt on Kennedy’s sex life, building on a 1969 auto accident at Chappaquiddick, Massachusetts, that resulted in the death of a young Kennedy aide, Mary Jo Kopechne. Though Kennedy had vowed not to seek the presidency in 1972, he was certain to play a big role in the campaign and had not ruled out a 1976 run.

“I’d really like to get Kennedy taped,” Nixon told Haldeman in April 1971. According to Haldeman’s 1994 book, The Haldeman Diaries, the president also wanted to have Kennedy photographed in compromising situations and leak the images to the press.

And when Kennedy received Secret Service protection as he campaigned
for McGovern, the Democratic presidential nominee, Nixon and Haldeman discussed a novel plan to keep him under surveillance: They would insert a retired Secret Service agent, Robert Newbrand, who had been part of Nixon’s protection detail when he was vice president, into the team protecting Kennedy.

“I’ll talk to Newbrand and tell him how to approach it,” Haldeman said, “because Newbrand will do anything that I tell him.”

“We just might get lucky and catch this son of a bitch and ruin him for ’76,” replied the president, adding, “That’s going to be fun.”

On September 8, 1971, Nixon ordered Ehrlichman to direct the Internal Revenue Service to investigate the tax returns of all the likely Democratic presidential candidates, as well as Kennedy. “Are we going after their tax returns?” Nixon asked. “You know what I mean? There’s a lot of gold in them thar hills.”

4. The war on the justice system

The arrest of the Watergate burglars set in motion Nixon’s fourth war, against the American system of justice. It was a war of lies and hush money, a conspiracy that became necessary to conceal the roles of top officials and to hide the president’s campaign of illegal espionage and political sabotage, including the covert operations that Mitchell described as “the White House horrors” during the Watergate hearings: the Huston Plan, the Plumbers, the Ellsberg break-in, Liddy’s Gemstone plan, and the proposed break-in at Brookings.

In a June 23, 1972, tape recording, six days after the arrests at the Watergate, Haldeman warned Nixon that “on the investigation, you know, the Democratic break-in thing, we’re back in the problem area, because the FBI is not under control . . . their investigation is now leading into some productive areas, because they’ve been able to trace the money.”

Haldeman said Mitchell had come up with a plan for the CIA to claim that national security secrets would be compromised if the FBI did not halt its Watergate investigation.

Nixon approved the scheme and ordered Haldeman to call in CIA director Richard Helms and his deputy Vernon Walters. “Play it tough,” the president directed. “That’s the way they play it, and that’s the way we are going to play it.”

The contents of the tape were made public on August 5, 1974. Four days later, Nixon resigned.
Another tape captured discussions in the Oval Office on August 1, 1972, six weeks after the burglars’ arrest, and the day on which the Post published our first story showing that Nixon campaign funds had gone into the bank account of one of the burglars.

Nixon and Haldeman discussed paying off the burglars and their leaders to keep them from talking to federal investigators. “They have to be paid,” Nixon said. “That’s all there is to that.”

On March 21, 1973, in one of the most memorable Watergate exchanges caught on tape, Nixon met with his counsel, John W. Dean, who since the break-in had been tasked with coordinating the cover-up.

“We’re being blackmailed” by Hunt and the burglars, Dean reported, and more people “are going to start perjuring themselves.”

“How much money do you need?” Nixon asked.

“I would say these people are going to cost a million dollars over the next two years,” Dean replied.

“And you could get it in cash,” the president said. “I, I know where it could be gotten. I mean, it’s not easy, but it could be done.”

Hunt was demanding $120,000 immediately. They discussed executive clemency for him and the burglars.

“I am not sure that you will ever be able to deliver on the clemency,” Dean said. “It may just be too hot.”

“You can’t do it till after the ’74 election, that’s for sure,” Nixon declared.

Haldeman then entered the room, and Nixon led the search for ways “to take care of the jackasses who are in jail.”

They discussed a secret $350,000 stash of cash kept in the White House, the possibility of using priests to help hide payments to the burglars, “washing” the money through Las Vegas or New York bookmakers, and empaneling a new grand jury so everyone could plead the Fifth Amendment or claim memory failure. Finally, they decided to send Mitchell on an emergency fundraising mission.

The president praised Dean’s efforts. “You handled it just right. You contained it. Now after the election, we’ve got to have another plan.”

5. The war on history

Nixon’s final war, waged even to this day by some former aides and historical revisionists, aims to play down the significance of Watergate and present it as a blip on the president’s record. Nixon lived for 20 years after his resignation and worked tirelessly to minimize the scandal.
Though he accepted a full pardon from President Gerald Ford, Nixon insisted that he had not participated in any crimes. In his 1977 television interviews with British journalist David Frost, he said that he had “let the American people down” but that he had not obstructed justice. “I didn’t think of it as a cover-up. I didn’t intend a cover-up. Let me say, if I intended the cover-up, believe me, I would have done it.”

In his 1978 memoir RN, Nixon addressed his role in Watergate: “My actions and omissions, while regrettable and possibly indefensible, were not impeachable.” Twelve years later, in his book In the Arena, he decried a dozen “myths” about Watergate and claimed that he was innocent of many of the charges made against him. One myth, he said, was that he ordered the payment of hush money to Hunt and others. Yet, the March 21, 1973, tape shows that he ordered Dean to get the money 12 times.

Even now, there are old Nixon hands and defenders who dismiss the importance of Watergate or claim that key questions remain unanswered. In 2012, Thomas Mallon, director of the creative writing program at George Washington University, published a novel called Watergate, a sometimes witty and entirely fictional story featuring many of the real players. Frank Gannon, a former Nixon White House aide who now works for the Nixon Foundation, reviewed the book for the Wall Street Journal.

“What emerges from ‘Watergate’ is an acute sense of how much we still don’t know about the events of June 17, 1972,” Gannon wrote. “Who ordered the break-in? . . . What was its real purpose? Was it purposely botched? How much was the CIA involved? . . . And how did a politician as tough and canny as Richard Nixon allow himself to be brought down by a ‘third-rate burglary’?

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

Of course, Gannon is correct in noting that there are some unanswered questions—but not the big ones. By focusing on the supposed paucity of details concerning the burglary of June 17, 1972, he would divert us from the larger story.

And about that story, there is no need to guess.

In the summer of 1974, it was neither the press nor the Democrats who rose up against Nixon, but the president’s own Republican Party.

On July 24, the Supreme Court ruled 8 to 0 that Nixon would have to turn over the secret tapes demanded by the Watergate special prosecutor. Three of the president’s appointees to the court—Chief Justice Warren E.
Burger, Justice Harry Blackmun, and Justice Lewis Powell—joined that opinion. The other Nixon appointee, Justice William Rehnquist, recused himself.

Three days later, six Republicans on the House Judiciary Committee joined the Democrats in voting, 27 to 11, to recommend Nixon’s impeachment for nine acts of obstruction of justice in the Watergate coverup.

By August, Nixon’s impending impeachment in the House was a certainty, and a group of Republicans led by Senator Barry Goldwater banded together to declare his presidency over. “Too many lies, too many crimes,” Goldwater said.

On August 7, the group visited Nixon at the White House.

How many votes would he have in a Senate trial? the president asked.

“I took kind of a nose count today,” Goldwater replied, “and I couldn’t find more than four very firm votes, and those would be from older Southerners. Some are very worried about what’s been going on, and are undecided, and I’m one of them.”

The next day, Nixon went on national television and announced that he would resign.

In his last remarks about Watergate as a senator, 77-year-old Sam Ervin, a revered constitutionalist respected by both parties, posed a final question: “Why was Watergate?”

The president and his aides, Ervin answered, had “a lust for political power.” That lust, he explained, “blinded them to ethical considerations and legal requirements; to Aristotle’s aphorism that the good of man must be the end of politics.”

Nixon had lost his moral authority as president. His secret tapes—and what they reveal—will probably be his most lasting legacy. On them, he is heard talking almost endlessly about what would be good for him, his place in history, and, above all, his grudges, animosities, and schemes for revenge. The dog that never seems to bark is any discussion of what is good and necessary for the well-being of the nation.

The Watergate that we wrote about in the Washington Post from 1972 to 1974 is not Watergate as we know it today. It was only a glimpse into something far worse. By the time he was forced to resign, Nixon had turned his White House, to a remarkable extent, into a criminal enterprise.

On the day he left, August 9, 1974, Nixon gave an emotional farewell speech in the East Room to his staff, his friends, and his cabinet. His fam-
ily stood with him. Near the end of his remarks, he waved his arm, as if to highlight the most important thing he had to say.

“Always remember,” he said, “others may hate you, but those who hate you don’t win unless you hate them, and then you destroy yourself.”

His hatred had brought about his downfall. Nixon apparently grasped this insight, but it was too late. He had already destroyed himself.