

Student Worksheet

May Marks 40th Anniversary of Watergate Hearings

<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/2013/05/may-marks-40th-anniversary-of-watergate-hearings/>

On June 17, 1972, five men were arrested for breaking into the Democratic National Committee (DNC) headquarters in the Watergate complex in Washington, D.C., setting off the political scandal that brought down President Richard Nixon.



The arrest prompted a series of nationally televised Senate hearings that captivated the nation and prompted Nixon to resign.

The hearings, which took place 40 years ago this month, were convened under the Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities with the premise of investigating ethical wrongdoing by both political parties, but soon became known simply as the Watergate Hearings.

A scandal unfolds

When news of a break-in at DNC headquarters first came to light, it was not evident that it was part of a larger scheme of political espionage, or spying.

While looking into the story, young Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein discovered that the burglars received money from Nixon's re-election committee, and that two Nixon aides had guided the burglars through the Watergate complex via walkie-talkies from their perch across the street.

They discovered that Attorney General John Mitchell oversaw a secret Republican fund to gather intelligence on Democrats. The FBI concluded that since 1971, the Committee to Re-elect the President (CRP) and the White House had been spying on Democrats, attempting to pacify Nixon's paranoia about losing his 1972 re-election.

But there was little need to worry. Despite public information about the Watergate burglary and the administration's involvement, Nixon easily won re-election in November 1972 against Democrat George McGovern with one of the largest margins in history.

In January 1973, the five burglars and their two accomplices appeared in federal district court, but even after two men were convicted, questions lingered. The Senate voted unanimously on Sen. Ted Kennedy's resolution to form the select committee to dig deeper into ethical wrongdoing related to the 1972 election.

Into Congress' hands

Four Democratic and three Republican senators were given a \$500,000 budget and subpoena powers to investigate the break-in and any subsequent illegal activity that came to light, much of which Woodward and Bernstein's reporting had already illuminated.

Conservative Southern Democrat Sam Ervin, a Senate elder and widely regarded Constitutional expert, was chosen to chair the committee both because he had no higher political aspirations that would compromise his impartiality and because his relative conservatism gave the committee bipartisan credibility.

Nixon forbid his aides from testifying before the committee, claiming executive privilege, but when Ervin threatened to have the White House sergeant at arms arrest the president, Nixon compromised, limiting executive privilege invocations to his records.

John Dean, who had served as White House counsel until Nixon fired him in April, was among the first to testify before the Senate committee in June. Seeking immunity from prosecution, he told senate investigators that Nixon knew about efforts to cover up the Watergate break-in, becoming the first White House insider to turn on Nixon. He recalled telling Nixon that the cover-up was a “cancer on the presidency”.

Nixon believed in taping all of his Oval Office conversations, but resisted Ervin’s subpoena of his tapes, once again claiming executive privilege. The Senate committee argued that separation of powers required the president to comply and sued Nixon in federal district court.

Nixon did not turn over the tapes until 1974, when the Supreme Court ordered him to in a separate case, United States v. Nixon. The evidence was damning, and the House Judiciary Committee adopted three articles of impeachment, prompting Nixon to resign in August 1974.

A stronger fourth estate

The hearings made Watergate a household name. One month after testimonies began, a whopping 97 percent of Americans knew about the Watergate break-in, and 67 percent believed Nixon to be involved; a dramatic shift from the previous fall when a majority of Americans voted for him.

Americans across the country watched the hearings on television, captivated by the suspense of the political drama growing thicker with each testimony.

The Post's Woodward and Bernstein had connected many of the dots that emerged between the break-in and the White House well before the hearings began. Relying on anonymous sources, they had to convince their editor at the Post, Ben Bradlee, that their story was correct.

Woodward famously met periodically in a parking garage with a source called "Deep Throat", later revealed as FBI agent Mark Felt, who confirmed details they'd pieced together.

The Watergate investigation ushered in an era of intensified investigative reporting as journalists in Washington went after corruption in government with renewed confidence.

Limiting executive privilege

Watergate also had a lasting effect on the American political process and the balance of government power.

The hearings showed a strengthened legislative branch holding the executive branch accountable, giving more Americans confidence in the institution. Sen. Joe McCarthy had eroded public confidence in Congress with his attempts to down hunt alleged communists during the Cold War.

As a result of the Watergate Committee's report, Congress amended the Federal Election Campaign Act to include limits on political contributions and the establishment of a public financing system for presidential primaries.

Congress' strengthening of the Freedom of Information Act in 1974 allowed the media more access to the executive branch, while the 1978 Ethics in Government Act (EGA) required financial disclosures for executive and judicial officials. The EGA created the Office of Government Ethics and the position of a permanent special prosecutor to investigate wrongdoing.

– Compiled by Simone Pathe for PBS NewsHour Extra

READING COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. How many years has it been since the Senate hearings that eventually led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon?
2. What is the name of the building complex in Washington, D.C., where the Democratic National Committee headquarters were located?
3. What was the name of the newspaper whose reporters investigated the DNC break-in?
4. What were the names of the two reporters?
5. What evidence did President Nixon attempt to conceal by citing executive privilege?
6. When did President Nixon resign?
7. Who was "Deep Throat"?
8. Name two things that changed because of the Watergate scandal.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (more research might be needed)

1. What role does the media play in government? Why do you think it's called the "fourth estate"?
2. What are some ethical problems regarding journalists using anonymous sources? What are pros and cons of anonymous sources?
3. Can you think of other political scandals? What happened and what were the consequences for those involved?

Extension Activity 2

Have students write a 300-500 word essay on this topic providing clear examples. Send your completed editorial to NewsHour Extra (extra@newshour.org). Exceptional essays might be published on our Web site.

Using NewsHour Extra Feature Stories

May Marks 40th Anniversary of Watergate Hearings

May 16, 2013

<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/2013/05/may-marks-40th-anniversary-of-watergate-hearings/>

Estimated Time: One 45-minute class period with possible extension

PROCEDURE

1. WARM UP

Use initiating questions to introduce the topic and find out how much your students know.

2. MAIN ACTIVITY

Have students read NewsHour Extra's feature story and answer the reading comprehension and discussion questions on the student handout.

3. DISCUSSION

Use discussion questions to encourage students to think about how the issues outlined in the story affect their lives and express and debate different opinions.

INITIATING QUESTIONS

1. What do you know about the Watergate scandal?
2. What does "freedom of the press" mean? Why is it important to democracy?
3. What does it mean for a president to be impeached?

READING COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. How many years has it been since the Senate hearings that eventually led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon?

40

2. What is the name of the building complex in Washington, D.C., where the Democratic National Committee headquarters were located?

The Watergate

3. What was the name of the newspaper whose reporters investigated the DNC break-in?

The Washington Post

4. What were the names of the two reporters?

Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein

5. What evidence did President Nixon attempt to conceal by citing executive privilege?

Taped Oval Office conversations that would have linked him to the Watergate break-in

6. When did President Nixon resign?

August 1974

7. Who was “Deep Throat”?

The anonymous source that provided information to Woodward about the break-in and government cover-up. He was later revealed as FBI agent Mark Felt

8. Name two things that changed because of the Watergate scandal.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (more research might be needed)

1. What role does the media play in government? Why do you think it’s called the “fourth estate”?
2. What are some ethical problems regarding journalists using anonymous sources? What are pros and cons of anonymous sources?
3. Can you think of other political scandals? What happened and what were the consequences for those involved?

Extension Activity 2

Have students write a 300-500 word essay on this topic providing clear examples. Send your completed editorial to NewsHour Extra (extra@newshour.org). Exceptional essays might be published on our Web site.