

# Watergate and the Bicentennial Election

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**Watergate and the Bicentennial Election**

By Lauren Welte '08



American politics is easily affected by a single event, and so political scandals often have a huge impact on the many changes it goes through over time. One such example of a political scandal is the Watergate affair that took place during Richard Nixon's reelection campaign in 1972, but mostly affected his second term in office when he was forced to resign. Watergate changed the way people looked at politics in general and impacted the 1976 presidential election in particular. The impact of Watergate on this election is first and foremost disillusionment and mistrust of government by the American people. This political atmosphere caused by both Watergate and Gerald Ford's pardon of Nixon affected the Republicans and Democrats in the 1976 campaign and election and may have been the ultimate reason for Jimmy Carter's victory.

Richard Nixon was elected president for his first term in 1968, defeating the Democratic Party candidate, Hubert Humphrey. In June 1971, towards the end of Nixon's first term, five burglars, including a Republican security aide, were arrested for breaking into the Democratic National Committee offices at the Watergate hotel to fix a malfunctioning bug that had been placed there. Nixon denied any participation in the burglary even though a check for \$25,000 that had supposedly been meant for his reelection campaign was discovered in one of the burglars' bank accounts. Despite the questions of corruption swirling around the Nixon administration, the American people chose to trust Nixon and he was reelected in 1972, winning over 60% of the vote to defeat George McGovern.

However, by the beginning of 1973, certain events pointed more and more towards Nixon's involvement in the scandal. First, Gordon Liddy and James McCord, Nixon's former aides were "convicted of conspiracy, burglary and wiretapping in the Watergate incident,"<sup>1</sup> followed by the resignation of Nixon's top aides in the White House, John Ehrlichman and H.R. Haldeman, and the Attorney General, Richard Kleindienst. In May of 1973, the Senate Watergate Committee started televised hearings on the scandal that were aired nationally and appointed Archibald Cox as the prosecutor for the case. Soon after, the committee discovered that Nixon had set up a tape system in his offices to record all his conversations, but Nixon refused to give the committee the tapes, fired Cox and "abolishe[d] the office of the special prosecutor."<sup>2</sup> Eventually, the Watergate Committee received permission from the Supreme Court to obtain the tapes despite Nixon's arguments of executive privilege. Three counts of impeachment were brought against Nixon, but he decided to resign instead, leaving Gerald Ford as the new president of the United States.

This political scandal, often called the Watergate Affair, led to a major change in the American people's attitudes towards the presidency. When the scandal first broke people wanted

<sup>1</sup> <http://watergate.info/chronology/brief.html>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

to believe that the press was only making up the story, or at least Nixon's part in it, because they needed Nixon to succeed in bringing peace after the disorder of the 1960's. Because of their denial of any wrongdoing on Nixon's end, Nixon was able to easily obtain a second term. However, people began to become more and more disillusioned once the Senate Watergate Committee started its televised hearings because they began to really doubt that Nixon did not participate in the scandal.<sup>3</sup> When the people finally had proof that Nixon did in fact take part in the affair, their respect for the presidency that had been in place before Watergate was suddenly destroyed by Nixon's betrayal of their trust. Therefore, due to Nixon's denial of participation and the constant excuses "the public became more cynical about politicians and less willing to accept their statements at face value,"<sup>4</sup> which meant that Americans were now very suspicious of anyone who was in a leadership position.

Another effect of Watergate on public opinion was it created a want in the people to punish the president and others for what they had done. For example, in a survey given to college students in 1973, a list of wrongdoings (which included campaign smear, exam theft and art forgery) was put together and the students were asked to rate those wrongdoings relative to Watergate. The results were that most of the students thought that none of the other transgressions were as bad as Watergate. When asked to explain why they had rated the wrongdoings in this way, the students said that they had based it on what harm each action would have on other people. The Watergate affair was believed to cause harm to the Democratic candidates on whom Nixon had been spying, so the students felt sympathy towards these people.<sup>5</sup> Also, the president was held to a higher standard because "the President is no ordinary person and the standards applying to the President are not ordinary standards."<sup>6</sup> Most people agreed that most of this anti-government mood could have been lessened if Nixon had just confessed.

The Watergate affair also caused the press to be much more critical of people in leadership positions and especially the president. The press would no longer accept what politicians told them was the truth and instead would continue to pry until the real truth came out. Therefore, the press was more prone to be aggressive in dealing with scandals after Watergate, partly to find the truth, but also for another reason. Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, two reporters who covered the Watergate scandal, had been successful in their plight to report aggressively. Their forceful reporting eventually led to the Senate Watergate Committee investigations.<sup>7</sup> Because of this new forcefulness on the part of the press, Ford had to deal with a greater than normal amount of scrutiny from the press, which caused his actions to be criticized even more readily.<sup>8</sup>

The intense feelings of mistrust towards the government which was now part of the political atmosphere was increased by Gerald Ford's pardon of Nixon four weeks after Ford became president. He had been looked upon favorably in the first four weeks before he pardoned Nixon. However, the pardon "reopened the Watergate wound and rubbed salt into"<sup>9</sup> it by putting Watergate back in the people's consciousness since it became the main story on the news again. Also, Ford's pardon brought criticism from the press that he had made a secret deal

<sup>3</sup> Liebovich, Louis (2003), *Richard Nixon, Watergate and the Press*, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, p.82.

<sup>4</sup> Dudley, William (2001), *Political Scandals: Opposing Viewpoints*, California: Greenhaven Press, Inc, p.13.

<sup>5</sup> Lang, Kurt (1983), *The Battle for Public Opinion*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 226.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 233.

<sup>7</sup> Dudley, William (2001), *Political Scandals: Opposing Viewpoints*, California: Greenhaven Press, Inc, p.14.

<sup>8</sup> Rozell, Mark (1992), *The Press and the Ford Presidency*, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, p. 82.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 52.

with Nixon. However, Ford argued that he pardoned Nixon because he thought a long trial “would irrevocably damage the world leadership role of the United States, the US economy, and the confidence that the American people placed in their political leaders”<sup>10</sup> and decided to do it despite knowing it would cost him six percent of the voters. By bringing back to the feelings the people had about Watergate and being criticized for a possible scandal of his own, Ford was now seen to be as untrustworthy as any other politician. Too, Ford was given the stereotype of not being a very intelligent person and was made fun of on television shows such as *SNL*.

Besides public opinion of the pardon, Ford’s presidency was affected in other ways because of his decision. Most important was the change from Republican to Democrat in the Congress that was partly caused by Nixon and partly caused by Ford’s pardon. During the elections, Ford was criticized for campaigning with the Republicans because he should have been “uniting and healing the country” and he “risked his presidential stature by associating himself so closely with the electoral fortunes of Republican candidates.”<sup>11</sup> The Republicans lost four seats in the Senate and forty seats in the House, which made it difficult to get anything done politically.<sup>12</sup> Getting things done was even more difficult for Ford because the Democrats were not in favor of the pardon and tended to be harder than usual on Ford’s congressional actions. This change in control in the Congress was not just blamed on Nixon because Ford “shredded his own credibility and put all Republican candidates on the Watergate spot less than two months before the election.”<sup>13</sup> As a result, the Republican incumbents lost many seats in the House and Senate; because of this loss of power Ford would be seen as a president who lacked direction and did not complete his legislative goals as quickly as possible. Besides the midterm elections, Ford was also criticized for keeping on many of the people who had been in Nixon’s administration.

Despite these negative feelings, Ford was still seen as open and honest. The reason was that the people wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt because they did not want to have to deal with another scandal or more corruption in the White House. Also, the people agreed with some things that Ford did after the pardon of Nixon. For example, he did not pardon Nixon’s co-conspirators and for the most part people agreed with this, although some people believed that if Nixon was pardoned the others involved should also be pardoned. Ford was also seen favorably for giving those who evaded the draft during the Vietnam War only conditional amnesty rather than complete amnesty.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, despite his mistake with the pardon, Ford was able to retain some of the honor of the presidency.

Because of these changes in public opinion due to Watergate and the pardoning of Nixon, the presidential election of 1976 was the first election in which the voters united around cynicism. Although this distrust of government had always been around, it began to increase after Kennedy’s assassination and American involvement in the Vietnam War and reached a peak after the scandal of Watergate was revealed. However, this was the first time the cynicism would play a part in an election because unlike Johnson, Ford decided not to step down. Ford thought he could trust the American people to choose the right candidate.<sup>15</sup> Because of this new

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<sup>10</sup> Maynard, Christopher, (1997). *Manufacturing Voter Confidence, Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 17, p. 525.

<sup>11</sup> Rozell, Mark (1992), *The Press and the Ford Presidency*, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, p. 72.

<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey, Harry (2004), *Watergate and the Resignation of Richard Nixon*, Washington D.C.: A Division of Congressional Quarterly Inc, p. 25.

<sup>13</sup> Rozell, Mark (1992), *The Press and the Ford Presidency*, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, p. 60.

<sup>14</sup> Lang, Kurt (1983), *The Battle for Public Opinion*, New York: Colombia University Press, p. 220.

<sup>15</sup> Maynard, Christopher, (1997). *Manufacturing Voter Confidence, Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 17, p. 529.

voter sentiment, a candidate's character became more important than his experience as a politician and morality became the main issue of campaigning.

Although "the election... was a fight for the confidence of the American voter"<sup>16</sup>, it had more to do with Washington in general, rather than Ford in particular. However, the effects of this mood in America still affected Ford because no one wanted to be associated with him since he was associated with the Washington that the people disliked. Therefore, during his campaign, Ford did not have much support from his fellow Republicans. The idea of cynicism toward Washington also affected the Democrats because this cynicism was directed towards all politicians and not just Republicans. In order to have the advantage in the election, a candidate was better off having the least political experience. Therefore, Jimmy Carter received the Democratic nomination because he had only served one term as the governor of Georgia. Carter also had been known to complain about the bureaucracy of the federal government, which made it difficult to get things done while he was governor. Therefore, Carter was someone with little political experience who would readily criticize the establishment of Washington. Carter became a model candidate for the attitude of the voters in America at this time.

Carter's platform became that of his moral character, including his Evangelical Christian faith and his trustworthiness. Although this helped him somewhat, stressing these aspects also had its setbacks. For example, he had a lot of press scrutiny focused on him; they were waiting for him to do something that would go against this moral character he was stressing. Therefore, when he mentioned in a *Playboy* interview that he often had thoughts of adultery, the people were outraged because of his emphasis on his Christian faith.<sup>17</sup> Also, the press began to criticize Carter for saying one thing in one area and another thing in a different area, which led the people to question how much they should trust him.

During his campaign Carter called for "a government as good and as honest and as decent and as competent and as compassionate and as filled with love as are the American people."<sup>18</sup> This idea stemmed from the people's want of someone who would blame everything on Washington because nothing was the fault of the average citizen. Although this atmosphere was perfect for Carter, it hurt Ford because he had never been chosen by the people, but had been selected by Nixon to replace Spiro Agnew when he had resigned as Vice President. Despite this disadvantage, Ford still decided to use the standard strategy of an incumbent stressing his presidential record, which may have hurt his chances of being reelected.

Although the negative public opinion caused by Watergate was the main issue that affected the election, Watergate itself was not an issue brought up by the candidates directly, although it was stressed in other ways. The topic was constantly reshaped, especially in the month before Election Day when news stations aired more stories related to Watergate than any other month in 1975 or 1976. What hurt Ford was that half of the stories aired mentioned Ford or related the story to something Ford had done.<sup>19</sup> Ford's role in Watergate also came to light when John Dean, while on NBC's *Today*, accused Ford of trying to block the investigation of the scandal so Nixon would not be implicated. This meant that Ford had to give a speech to address the issue a week later. Also, although Carter never mentioned Watergate directly, he gave certain statements that were unmistakably referring to Watergate or the pardon. For example, in his speech accepting his nomination he said, "I see no reason why big-shot crooks should go

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 527.

<sup>17</sup> Schudson, Michael, (1992). *Watergate in American Memory*, New York: Basic Books, p. 76.

<sup>18</sup> Elliot, Euel (1989), *Issues and Elections*, London: Westview Press, p. 44.

<sup>19</sup> Rozell, Mark (1992), *The Press and the Ford Presidency*, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, p. 240.

free while the poor ones go to jail,"<sup>20</sup> which was obviously a reference to the pardon and Carter's disagreement with it.

The public sentiment after Watergate affected not only what the candidates campaigned about but also how they campaigned. Since trust is more a perception rather than a consideration of facts, the American people needed to be able to visually form an image of each candidate. Stemming from this issue of trust, television became an important part of the campaign. Once Ford realized that he was not effectively separating himself from the Nixon image, he decided to challenge Carter to a televised debate to form his own public image. However, the debate worked better for Carter because Ford appeared firm and rigid while Carter constantly smiled and therefore seemed more warm and open.<sup>21</sup> Also, heads of campaign advertising had to make sure that the ads did not portray a different person than the one displayed on the news. Therefore, radio served more to reinforce the message the candidates had running on TV, rather than to attack the candidates as had been done before.<sup>22</sup>

Since the public opinion was changed by the Watergate scandal, Ford was never able to pull ahead in the polls and Jimmy Carter won the election by a close margin due to his emphasis on morality and trust. Perhaps if Ford had never pardoned Nixon he would have been able to pull himself away from the Nixon administration, something he was never able to do during the campaign and election. Whatever the specific cause for Ford's defeat in 1976, the underlying cause from which he could never break free was that of the Watergate affair and the effect it had on the way Americans would view politicians both in 1976 and up until the present time.

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<sup>20</sup> Schudson, Michael (1992), *Watergate in American Memory*, New York: Basic Books, p. 75.

<sup>21</sup> Maynard, Christopher (1997), Manufacturing Voter Confidence, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 17, p. 558.

<sup>22</sup> Jamieson, Kathleen (1996), *Packaging the Presidency*, 3rd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 347.

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