

WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #25

On June 17, 1972, something strange happened at the Watergate office/apartment/hotel complex in Washington, D.C. Early that morning, five men carrying wiretapping equipment were apprehended there while they were breaking into the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee (DNC). When asked by the press, a White House spokesman for President Richard Nixon dismissed the episode as “a third-rate burglary attempt.” Pressed further, Nixon himself denied any White House involvement in “this very bizarre incident.” In fact, however, the two masterminds of the break-in, G. Gordon Liddy and E. Howard Hunt, were former FBI and CIA agents currently working for Nixon’s Committee to Re-elect the President (CREEP).

During the course of the presidential campaign of 1972, Senator George McGovern, the Democrat candidate from South Dakota, complained about the “dirty tricks” of the Nixon administration. He especially focused on the curious Watergate incident in which this group of burglars had been caught red-handed. At the time, however, McGovern’s accusations seemed shrill and biased – the lamentations of an obvious loser.

The Watergate break-in, however, was no isolated incident. It was part of a broad pattern of abuse of power by a White House obsessed with its enemies. The White House had become committed to illegal tactics as early as 1970 when the *New York Times* disclosed that secret American bombings in Cambodia had been going on for years. Nixon had ordered illegal telephone taps on several newsmen and government employees suspected of leaking the story. The covert activity against the press and critics of Nixon’s Vietnam policies had increased in 1971 during the crisis generated by the publication of the Pentagon Papers, when a team of burglars under the direction of White House advisor John Ehrlichman had broken into a psychiatrist’s office in an effort to obtain damaging information on Daniel Ellsberg, the man who had given the papers to the press. By the Spring of 1972 Ehrlichman was commanding a team of “dirty tricksters,” who performed various acts of sabotage against prospective Democrat candidates for the presidency. These “dirty tricks” included falsely accusing Senator Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota and Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson of Washington of sexual improprieties, forging press releases, setting off stink bombs at Democrat rallies, and associating the opposition candidates with racist remarks. By the time of the Watergate break-in, the money to finance such “pranks” was being illegally collected through the Committee to Re-elect the President and placed under the control of the White House staff.

Liddy and Hunt, CREEP operatives on the White House payroll, were part of a clandestine squad, known as the “plumbers,” that Nixon had established to plug administration “leaks” and do other nasty jobs. Liddy and Hunt were soon arranging illegal wiretaps at DNC headquarters, part of the campaign of “dirty tricks” against the Democrats. The siege mentality of Nixon best explains his fatal misstep. He could have disassociated himself from the break-in by firing his guilty aides or even just by letting justice take its course. But it was election time, and Nixon did not trust his political future to such a

strategy. Instead, he arranged hush money for the burglars and instructed the CIA to stop an FBI investigation into the affair. Thus, the President initiated and participated in obstruction of justice – a criminal offense.

Nixon kept the lid on until after the election of 1972. Early in 1973, however, one of the Watergate burglars, James W. McCord, a former CIA agent and security chief for CREEP, began to talk. During the trial of the accused Watergate burglars, the relentless prodding of Judge John J. Sirica led McCord to tell the full story of the Nixon administration's complicity in the Watergate episode. McCord was the first in a long line of informers and repentant people in a melodrama that unfolded over the next two years.

In the meantime, two reporters at the *Washington Post*, Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, uncovered CREEP's illegal slush fund and its links to key White House aides. The trail of evidence pursued first by Judge Sirica, then by a grand jury, and then in May, 1973 by a Senate investigation committee headed by Senator Samuel J. Ervin, Jr., a Democrat from North Carolina, led directly to the White House. This committee began holding nationally televised hearings. Ervin, a graduate of Harvard law school, liked to portray himself as "just a poor country lawyer from North Carolina." But, besides being colorful and folksy, he was fair and wise and astute in his questioning of witnesses. Republican Senator Howard Baker of Tennessee, the ranking minority member of the Ervin committee, put the crucial questions succinctly: "What did the President know, and when did he know it?" There was never any evidence that Nixon had ordered the break-in or that he was aware of plans to burglarize the DNC. But from the start Nixon was personally involved in the cover-up of the incident. He used his presidential powers to discredit and block the investigation. Most alarming of all, the Watergate burglary was merely one small part of a larger pattern of corruption and criminality sanctioned by the Nixon White House.

The cover-up unraveled further on April 27th, 1973, when L. Patrick Gray, acting director of the FBI, resigned after confessing that he had confiscated and destroyed several incriminating documents. Three days later, Ehrlichman and H. R. Haldeman, Nixon's top two advisors on domestic policy, resigned, together with Attorney General Richard Kleindienst. During that same month, Assistant Secretary of Commerce Jeb Magruder began cooperating with federal prosecutors. He confessed his guilt in August, 1973 to a one-count indictment of conspiracy to obstruct justice, to defraud the United States, and to eavesdrop illegally on the Democratic Party's national headquarters at the Watergate Hotel. He implicated former Attorney General John Mitchell, White House counsel John Dean, and others. In the meantime, President Nixon downplayed the scandal as mere politics. He called news articles biased and misleading.

But then John Dean, whom Nixon had dismissed as counsel to the president because of his cooperation with prosecutors, told the Ervin committee that there had been a cover-up and that Nixon had approved it. In another "bombshell" disclosure, Alexander Butterfield, a White House aide, told the committee that Nixon had installed a taping system in the Oval Office and that many of the conversations about Watergate had been recorded.

A year-long battle for the “Nixon tapes” began. Harvard law professor Archibald Cox, who had been appointed by Nixon as special prosecutor to handle the Watergate case, took the president to court in October, 1973, in order to obtain the tapes. Nixon, pleading “executive privilege,” refused to release the tapes and ordered Cox fired. In what became known as the “Saturday Night Massacre,” Attorney General Elliot Richardson and Deputy Attorney General William Ruckelshaus resigned rather than execute the order. Leon Jaworski, Cox’s replacement as special prosecutor, proved no more pliable than Cox. He also took the president to court.

In November, 1973 lawyers for the president revealed that sections of certain audio recordings were missing, including 18 minutes of a key conversation during which Nixon first mentioned the Watergate burglary. In her grand jury testimony in 1974 Rose Mary Woods, the president’s loyal personal secretary, tried to accept blame for the erasure, claiming that she had accidentally pushed the wrong button and had eliminated between 5 and 6 minutes of the tape. While not conclusive proof that the president had committed wrongdoing, the gap caused many people to doubt Nixon’s statement that he had been unaware of the cover-up. Experts later concluded that the missing segments had been intentionally deleted – but not by Woods.

Under enormous pressure President Nixon eventually in April, 1974 released 1,200 pages of transcripts of White House conversations between him and his aides. On July 24, 1974, the United States Supreme Court ruled unanimously in the case of the *United States v. Nixon* that the president must surrender the unexpurgated tapes and ordered him to do so. The decision was 8 to 0, because Chief Justice William Rehnquist did not sit on the case. No sooner were the tapes handed over than lawyers found in them incontrovertible evidence that the president had ordered the cover-up. One of the tapes came to be known as the “Smoking Gun Tape.” It revealed that just six days after the Watergate break-in Nixon and Haldeman had discussed ways to obstruct the FBI’s investigation. This revelation directly led to a collapse in congressional support for Nixon.

On July 27, 1974, the House Judiciary Committee took the momentous step of recommending that the president of the United States be impeached and removed from office for unlawful activities that formed a “course of conduct or plan” to obstruct the investigation of the Watergate break-in and to cover up other unlawful activities. This committee dramatically voted to recommend 3 specific articles of impeachment: 1) obstruction of justice through the payment of “hush money” to witnesses and the withholding of evidence; 2) using federal agencies to deprive citizens of their constitutional rights; and 3) defiance of Congress by withholding the tapes. The vote was 27 to 11, with 6 of the committee’s 17 Republicans joining all 21 Democrats in voting to send the articles to the House.

But before the House of Representatives could meet to vote on impeachment, Nixon handed over the complete set of White House tapes. Republican Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, known as “Mr. Conservative,” visited the White House and informed the president that the votes were there in the Senate to convict him. Fully aware that the evidence on the tapes implicated him in the cover-up and certain of being convicted by the Senate, Richard Nixon resigned from office on August 9, 1974, the only president ever to do so.

The Watergate scandal contained the qualities of a soap opera and Machiavellian intrigue. It ended in the first resignation of a president in American history, the conviction and imprisonment of 25 officials of the Nixon administration, including 4 cabinet members, and the most serious constitutional crisis since the impeachment trial of President Andrew Johnson in 1868.