

President— or as its critics abbreviated it, **CREEP**. Gordon Liddy briefed John Ehrlichman, the president, and chief of staff Haldeman, then proceeded to attempt to cover up any connection between the White House and the illegal wiretaps at the DNC. At first, the president had the CIA warn off the FBI, suggesting that it should not pursue any leads in the Watergate break-in for national security reasons. But early in 1973, a federal judge threatened the arrested burglars with long sentences unless they gave up their superiors. John Dean, the Nixon White House’s legal advisor, decided to cooperate with prosecutors. The president not only fired Dean, but also Ehrlichman and Haldeman. Attorney General Elliott Richardson appointed a respected legal professor, Archibald Cox, as a special independent prosecutor to investigate Watergate.

Meanwhile, via televised Senate hearings, the public learned with dismay about the ways in which the Nixon campaign had raised millions, Nixon’s dirty tricks against his opponents, and the cover-up. When testimony in the hearings revealed the existence of a tape-recording system in the Oval Office, which the president had used to record conversations since 1970, investigators turned to the President for the release of his tapes. When a judge demanded the tapes at the request of Cox, the President ordered his Attorney General Elliott Richardson to fire the special counsel. Both Richardson and his Assistant Attorney General refused to comply with what they saw as the president’s unconstitutional interference in the judicial process. Following their departure, a third acting Attorney General carried out the president’s order.

Public outrage over this mass firing—which became known as the “**Saturday Night Massacre**”—flooded Congress, along with demands that Congress impeach the president. In the first six months of 1974, the Judiciary Committee of the House of Representatives prepared the case against Nixon. In July, the committee recommended his impeachment on account of obstruction of justice, abuse of power, and illegal disregard of congressional subpoenas. Shortly thereafter, the Supreme Court ordered the President to release all tapes. Despite apparent efforts to eliminate the most incriminating evidence—there was an eighteen-and-a-half-minute gap in the most noteworthy tape—the recordings included a conversation in which Nixon and Haldeman discuss their plan to use the CIA in the cover-up. With an impeachment now certain, Nixon had no choice but to [resign](#). His presidency ended on August 9, 1974.¹¹⁶

The Watergate scandal had presented the nation with a grave constitutional crisis that tested the separation of powers. Ultimately, Nixon’s machinations significantly undermined the “Imperial Presidency” of the postwar years. The political drama that unfolded tainted the office of the President, especially since the investigation revealed the extent of disdain and resentment Nixon had felt toward antiwar protesters, Democrats, and African Americans. Vice President Spiro Agnew’s conviction for corruption and his resignation only added to the crisis. The new Vice President Gerald Ford from Michigan was not part of Watergate, but disappointed many Americans when, as a new president, he pardoned his predecessor for all crimes related to Watergate.

At first, it appeared that Republicans were significantly damaged by the Watergate scandal. In the short term, that proved correct with the election of the Democrat and Washington outsider Jimmy Carter in 1976. But in the long run, Watergate sent a message that hurt Democrats more than Nixon’s party: the federal government could not be trusted. Along with the bitter struggles, tensions, and violence of the sixties, Watergate contributed to the disappointments of a decade that had initially seemed to offer hope for a fairer society, a safer world, and a better government.

SECTION IV SUMMARY

- ✧ A series of assassinations, riots, and antiwar demonstrations, as well as a tumultuous Democratic National Convention made 1968 the most volatile year in 1960s American life and politics.
- ✧ Richard M. Nixon’s presidency surprised many Americans with moderate policies and progress on some foreign policy fronts, but it also marked the end of a generation of Democratic national political dominance.
- ✧ Nixon’s policy of Vietnamization secured the withdrawal of American troops from war, but it did not end political and social upheaval over the war.
- ✧ New economic challenges, deep political divisions over the war and civil rights, and a constitutional crisis over the power of the president in the Watergate affair marked the end of the 1960s.

