Watergate: The Scandal That Never Goes Away

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WATERGATE

A New History

By Garrett M. Graff

Seldom had a White House event been more meticulously planned than the June 12, 1971, wedding of President Richard Nixon's daughter Tricia to Edward F. Cox, the 24-year-old scion of a prominent New York family. A who's who of celebrities and notables attended, including Billy Graham, Norman Vincent Peale and J. Edgar Hoover. The 87-year-old Alice Roosevelt Longworth, who herself had been married at the White House in 1906, shakily dug her invitation out of her handbag to present to security. Cameras clicked madly when the newlyweds cut their seven-tier wedding cake. Yet when the stories hit the news, the Rose Garden gala was portrayed as Squaresville, U.S.A. Nixon was livid. "If it were the Kennedys," he complained to his chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, "it would be rerun every night for three weeks." He found the smugness of The Washington Post particularly infuriating. "I just don't like that paper," he grumbled to his press secretary, Ron Ziegler, demanding that The Post be banned from future White House social events.

As the journalist and historian Garrett M. Graff details in his dazzling "Watergate: A New History," the White House's anti-press escalation began the very next day when The New York Times ran Neil Sheehan's eye-popping "Vietnam Archive: Pentagon Study Traces Three Decades of Growing Involvement." It was the initial volley describing what came to be called "The Pentagon Papers," a classified 7,000-page Defense Department study, leaked by the defense analyst Daniel Ellsberg, that traced the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. "The Pentagon Papers contained all the right ingredients for an explosion," Graff writes. "They played to Nixon's conspiratorial paranoid nature, to his antipathy for the press in general and The Washington Post and The New York Times in specific; moreover, they focused on a government cover-up, catnip to reporters, that stemmed from the thing Nixon hated most next to perhaps antiwar protesters —leakers."

Nixon had been the first president since 1848 to enter the White House without control of either congressional body, which forced him to triangulate with Democratic senators to pass laws like the Clean Air Act and the Occupational Health and Safety Act —both landmarks of the liberal era of American governance. But his refusal to immediately pull troops out of Vietnam, coupled with his administration's illegal incursions into Cambodia and Laos, had earned him a villainous reputation. Seething that the media, the Democrats and the counterculture were all out to destroy him, Nixon fought back.

Treating politics as a blood sport, he disregarded the protocols and proprieties of the executive branch, putting himself above the law. Beyond suing The Times, he recruited a team of former F.B.I. and C.I.A. operatives for clandestine operations intended to plug the Pentagon Papers leak. On Sept. 3, 1971, that team —nicknamed "the plumbers" —broke into the Los Angeles office of Dr. Lewis Fielding, Ellsberg's psychiatrist, seeking evidence to discredit the whistle-blower. They found nothing, but the file cabinet they pried open is now on display at the Smithsonian.

As Nixon's 1972 re-election effort gained steam, one of those plumbers, G. Gordon Liddy, was transferred to the Committee to Re-Elect the President (CREEP), where he obtained approval from Attorney General John Mitchell for a wide-ranging plan of espionage. On May 28, 1972, Liddy's men staged their first break-in at the Democratic

National Committee headquarters at Washington's Watergate complex, bugging the telephones of staffers. During a subsequent incursion on June 17, they were discovered and apprehended —touching off the scandal that would ultimately take down the administration.

A lively writer, Graff explores the dramatic scope of the Watergate saga through its participants —politicians, investigators, journalists, whistle-blowers and, at center stage, Nixon himself: power broker extraordinaire, five-time fixture on Republican presidential tickets between 1952 and 1972, and holder of the record for most appearances on the cover of Time magazine, at 55 issues. For all his accomplishments, the 37th president was a man of deep contradictions: a law-and-order candidate who flouted the law, an insecure man with a deep reservoir of hubris, a traditional-values president who drank to excess and cursed like a sailor.

While Nixon's predecessor, Lyndon Johnson, thrived amid disorder, Nixon maintained a clean desk and kept his circle of advisers small. "Just one dinky little phone to keep in touch with his people," a flabbergasted Johnson scoffed after dining with Nixon. "That's all —just three buttons and they all go to Germans!" —those being the chief of staff, Haldeman; the domestic policy chief, John Ehrlichman; and the national security adviser, Henry Kissinger. Reporters variously referred to this team as the German Shepherds, the Berlin Wall, the Fourth Reich and "the King's Krauts."

Graff ably recounts the tense interactions between Nixon and his people in the aftermath of the Watergate break-in. After a 16-minute telephone talk with Senator Sam Ervin, who wanted to send the attorney Samuel Dash to the White House to study files, Nixon abruptly hung up. "There ain't gonna be no papers that come out," Nixon vented to Kissinger and Al Haig. "Let him sue, Christ, they —if the Supreme Court wants to decide in its wisdom to help destroy the presidency, the Supreme Court destroys it. I'm not gonna destroy it." Nixon launched into a tirade about immediately finding the "toughest, meanest, right-wing nominees" to appoint as federal judges. "No Jews," Nixon barked. "Is that clear? We've got enough Jews. Now if you find some Jew I think is great, put him on there. Put a Black Jew?"

With granular detail, Graff writes about the white-collar criminals, hatchet men and rogues who populated the outer circles of Nixon's covert operations. The deputy campaign manager, Jeb Magruder, arguably comes off the worst, "an empty vessel of a man, all too ready to fulfill others' ambitions, taskings and visions." Though competent enough to help devise Nixon's winning 1972 re-election slogan, "Now More Than Ever," he displayed a carelessness that saw him nonchalantly introducing Liddy to Washington reporters as CREEP's "man in charge of dirty tricks." This caused Liddy to beg the White House counsel, John Dean, to fire the preppy loudmouth. "Magruder's an asshole, John," Liddy pleaded, "and he's going to blow my cover." Magruder stayed on, then flipped to federal prosecutors in exchange for reduced charges.

The heroes of "Watergate" are predictable: Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of The Washington Post. Charting their trajectory from the arraignment of the Watergate burglars on June 17, 1972, until Vanity Fair revealed the identity of Deep Throat in 2005, Graff celebrates their tenacity while also documenting dramatic embellishments in their best-selling memoir "All the President's Men."

Watergate studies can be a rabbit hole of hard-to-decipher tapes and half-baked theories. As a former Politico Magazine editor, Graff chafes at hunches and internet misinformation. Therefore, it's notable that he suggests the C.I.A. *might* have set up the voice-activated system that sank Nixon's ship. The mysterious figure of Alexander Butterfield looms large in this regard. According to Graff, Rose Mary Woods, Nixon's secretary, believed that Butterfield, who installed the White House taping system, was a C.I.A. operative. "I have to agree," Haldeman is quoted as saying. "She may have a point."

Nixon studies have matured in the past 50 years thanks to superb books by Rick Perlstein, John A. Farrell, Irwin F. Gellman, Margaret MacMillan and others. But neither they nor Graff's "Watergate" answers some longstanding big questions. Who officially ordered the break-in? What was the aim? Were such central players as Howard Hunt and James McCord cooperating with the C.I.A. even as they orchestrated the break-in?

Meanwhile, Nixon still hovers in the dark shadows of American history, the jowly-faced villain tattooed on Roger Stone's back, and his signature scandal has provided shorthand for every other -gate scandal that's followed. As

for Tricia Nixon? Five decades later she and Ed Cox remain happily married.

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