

Crisis in Democracy

HS931

Activity Introduction

Hi, I'm (name), nineteen sixty-eight was a busy year, and as a result of the presidential election, the United States had a new president.

Richard Nixon became the thirty-seventh president, and changed the way we think about the presidency.

Reading Passage Introduction

Nixon had made a name for himself back in nineteen forty-eight, by being tough on communism. He also served as vice president of the United States from nineteen fifty-three to nineteen fifty-ninesixty-one.

He made an unsuccessful bid for the presidency in nineteen sixty, but won in nineteen sixty-eight. Let's take a look at the facts about President's Nixon's first term in office.

Video 1 - Introduction

So let's find out more about Watergate, the burglars, the plumbers, and what it meant to President Nixon.

Let's just say that it wasn't the best of times for Richard Nixon. Nixon was on thin ice, and thanks to a pair of reporters and an anonymous source the entire country got to watch him fall.

Video 1

Throughout Richard Nixon's time in the White House, his political operatives had been engaging in dirty tricks against his opponents. By June of 1972, however, these acts,

including sabotage, wire tapping, larceny and other illegal activities had come to the attention of two young reporters at the Washington Post. Eventually, the story of these misdeeds crowned by the break in at the democratic offices at the Watergate Hotel and their subsequent cover up by the administration, would be break the Nixon administration and result in the first and only resignation of a U.S. president.

So how did all of this come about? First, let's look at the Dirty Trick Squad and the Plumbers and what they did for the president. Throughout his term as president, Richard Nixon had kept men on his staff that were referred to as the Dirty Trick Squad. One of the main ring leaders of the Dirty Trick Squad was the Attorney General of the United States, John Mitchell. The group of men included E. Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy. And Hunt and Liddy were later indicted in the Watergate break in, often engaged in orchestrated retribution against the enemies of the administration.

Nixon kept an infamous enemies list and people on this list included Daniel Ellsberg and Jack Anderson and Daniel Schorr and they were often the target of the dirty tricks of the group. Daniel Ellsberg had been responsible for the release to the media of a highly critical government study of decision making in Viet Nam that had been intended for the administration and not for the public. These were called the Pentagon Papers and he was one of the main targets.

Members of the dirty tricks group tried to break in to Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office in 1971 to gain compromising information about him. Daniel Schorr and Jack Anderson, who were both reporters and critical of the administration, were also targets. Nixon himself ordered the F.B.I. to investigate Schorr after he had filed reports critical of the administration's policies. Liddy had even talked about the assassination of Anderson with others in the group. Along with the Dirty Trick Squad there was a group called the

Plumbers, who were responsible for stopping leaks to the press by members of the administration. Only months after Nixon took office in 1969, Nixon wanted to keep people in the administration from talking to the press, so Nixon and the National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, ordered illegal wire taps on telephones and then the bugging of offices of the journalists and people working in the administration.

By 1972, Nixon had formed an organization known as The Committee to Re-elect the President. This was abbreviated CRP in the administration, but was called CREEP by the people that were political opponents. CREEP was responsible for many more dirty tricks tied to the campaign and was funded by an illegal slush fund. These were campaign funds that had been laundered in Mexico.

In June of 1972, seven men employed, either directly or indirectly by CREEP, orchestrated a break in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters, located in the Watergate Hotel in Washington, D.C. The story broke in the national media later in 1972 with the Washington Post, led by the reporters, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein taking the lead on the reporting. Five of the men were arrested at the scene due to the alertness of a security guard who noticed the doors had been taped shut in various offices in the Watergate building. Two more men, Hunt and Liddy, were later indicted in September of 1972 for conspiracy and for violating the federal wire tapping laws. All seven of the men were convicted in 1973.

The break in at the Watergate and the media coverage that followed was the beginning of the end for the Nixon administration. Despite the campaign of dirty tricks and the constant action against those on the enemies list, it was the high profile fiasco at the Watergate that started to unravel the paranoid presidency of President Richard Milhous Nixon.

Video 1 – Recap

No doubt that this was going to cause some problems for the president. His credibility took a big hit and the timing of the event couldn't have been worse.

Reading Passage Introduction

So now that you know who they were, let's take a look at how they put the pieces together that led to the resignation of the president of the United States.

Video 2 - Introduction

After President Nixon resigned, the United States got to know its new president, Gerald Ford. Let's learn a little about him ourselves.

Video 2

With the Watergate scandal exploding in the American consciousness by the summer of 1974, President Nixon seemed to be in deep trouble. The House of Representatives had opened impeachment hearings against Nixon and several of the Articles of Impeachment looked likely to pass. It became apparent in Nixon's last days that newly appointed Vice President Gerald Ford was likely to take over the presidency. Despite never having been elected to the office of vice president or president, because he had become vice president when Vice President, Spiro T. Agnew had been forced to resign after being charged with income tax evasion in 1973.

So let's see how this crisis in democracy finally ended. In May of 1974, the House Judiciary Committee had begun to debate Articles of Impeachment against Nixon. It was clear that, despite Nixon's refusal to release some of the tapes of White House

conversations, more than one of the Articles would be approved by the committee and sent to the House for full consideration.

By July of 1974, events began to spiral out of control for President Nixon and on July 24th, the Supreme Court ruled against the president in the case U.S. v. Nixon and ordered him to release all the requested tapes to the special prosecutor. Three days later, without listening to the remaining tapes, the Judiciary Committee recommended the first of the Articles of Impeachment, which alleged obstruction of justice. The committee would recommend two more Articles in the subsequent days, abuse of power and contempt of Congress.

By the beginning of August, congressional leaders led by Arizona Senator, Barry Goldwater, asked Nixon to resign for the good of the country and he complied. Nixon announced to the nation that he would resign the presidency on August the 9th, 1974. Upon Nixon's resignation, Vice President, Gerald Ford took over as president.

But who was this man who became president without being elected? Well, Gerald Ford's rise to the presidency was an unlikely political story, especially considering that less than one year before, he was a Congressman from Michigan. Ford had been a great athlete at the University of Michigan and had turned down a contract with the Green Bay Packers in order to attend law school at Yale. He also, like many in his generation, had served in the Navy in World War Two, and was elected to Congress in 1948. Ford served in the House of Representatives from 1949 until he became vice president in 1973.

During Lyndon Johnson's administration, Ford was appointed to the Warren Commission that investigated the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, despite friction between Ford and Johnson. Ford then rose to the position of House Minority Leader in 1965. Now, Ford was criticized for never having authored a major piece of legislation and was also known for an ability to negotiate with members of both parties.

Upon the resignation of Spiro Agnew from the vice presidency, Ford was appointed under the newly enacted 25th Amendment to the Constitution that would allow him to fill his position. President Nixon had consulted with the Congress and the democrats in Congress had advised him to appoint Ford. Ford was easily confirmed, thus becoming the first vice president to obtain the office in this manner. Upon Nixon's resignation in August of 1974, Ford became the only man to serve as president that had not been elected to either of the nation's two highest offices.

In his first presidential address, Ford wanted to reunify the American people and help them get passed Watergate. And Ford is famously quoted as saying, "My fellow Americans, our long national nightmare is over. Our Constitution works. Our great republic is a government of laws and not of men. Here, the people rule." However, less than one month after taking the oath of office, Ford issued a pardon to former President Nixon. This controversial pardon was one of the reasons Ford was defeated by Jimmy Carter in the election of 1976. During Ford's administration, there were several major events that included the SALT Arms Reduction Treaty with the Soviet Union, the U.S. Bicentennial, which celebrated 200 years of American independence, the withdrawal of U.S. personnel from Viet Nam, two assassination attempts on his life and he faced a fierce primary challenge in 1976 from former California Governor Ronald Reagan.

Ford won the republican nomination and faced democrat Jimmy Carter in the general election. Carter, who campaigned as an outsider and a reformer, began the campaign with a nearly 30 point lead. Ford narrowed Carter's lead a lot, but in the end lost the electoral vote, 297 to 240 in a very close election. Since Watergate, the American people have become more cynical of government and often criticize the way the government operates. Many seem to have lost faith in the democratic process in the United States, but as President Ford pointed out, "Our Constitution works. Here, the people rule."

Video 2 - Recap

It must have been really tough to become president under those circumstances. Ford knew the next few months would be difficult and that he would have to regain the trust of the citizens of the United States.

Following the events of Watergate, the nation had a different view of the president and the executive branch.

End of Activity Review

So, we've learned that there was a break-in at the Watergate hotel and it was sponsored by the Committee to Re-elect the president.

As reporters from the Washington Post began to investigate, they found out that President Nixon was involved.

After months of hearings, charges, trials, firings, and uncertainty, President Nixon became the first United States president to resign from office.

One last thing, remember that former President Nixon was never charged or tried for any crimes because President Ford pardoned him of any wrongdoing.