

Chapter 53

The Rise and Fall of Richard Nixon

What events influenced Richard Nixon's rise to and fall from power?

53.1 Introduction

On September 23, 1952, California senator Richard Nixon reserved time on national television to make the most important speech of his career. He hoped to silence claims that he had accepted \$18,000 in illegal political contributions to help cover personal expenses. The Republicans had recently nominated Nixon to run for vice president, alongside Dwight D. Eisenhower. When the charges became public, Eisenhower remained noncommittal. He did not drop Nixon from the ticket, but he also did not come to the defense of his running mate.

In his speech, Nixon told Americans, "Not one cent of the \$18,000 or any other money of that type ever went to me for my personal use. Every penny of it was used to pay for political expenses that I did not think should be charged to the taxpayers of the United States." He did, however, confess to having accepted one personal gift from a contributor:

A man down in Texas heard [my wife] Pat on the radio mention the fact that our two youngsters would like to have a dog. And, believe it or not, the day before we left on this campaign trip, we got a message from Union Station in Baltimore saying they had a package for us. We went down to get it. You know what it was. It was a little cocker spaniel dog in a crate he'd sent all the way from Texas. Black and white spotted. And our little girl—Tricia, the 6-year-old—named it Checkers. And you know, the kids, like all kids, love the dog, and I just want to say this right now, that regardless of what they say about it, we're gonna keep it.

—Senator Richard Nixon, "Checkers" speech, September 23, 1952

Nixon's "Checkers" speech was a high point in a tumultuous career that culminated in his election to the presidency in 1968. In the years that followed, President Nixon would engineer stunning successes in both domestic and foreign affairs. He would also set in motion a humiliating fall from power.



This 1952 photograph shows vice presidential candidate Richard Nixon relaxing with his pet dog, Checkers. In his famous "Checkers" speech, Nixon defended himself against charges that he had misused campaign contributions. He made it clear that his family did not live lavishly, emphasizing that his wife, Pat, wore not a mink coat but "a respectable Republican cloth coat."



In his 1968 presidential election campaign, Nixon reached out to moderate, middle-of-the-road voters. In a pamphlet titled "The Nixon Stand," he outlined his position on five key issues facing the country. He defined these issues as winning the peace, fighting rising crime, progress with order, preventing runaway government, and respect for America.

53.2 Richard Nixon's Rise to the Presidency

Born in California in 1913, Richard Nixon was one of five brothers. He worked to pay his way through college and law school. After serving in the Navy during World War II, he was elected to the House of Representatives and, later, to the Senate. From 1953 to 1960, he served as vice president to Dwight Eisenhower.

In 1960, Nixon ran for president. He lost to John F. Kennedy in a very close election. Two years later, he ran for governor of California and lost that race as well. In his concession speech, Nixon announced his retirement from politics. "You won't have Richard Nixon to kick around any more," he told reporters. In reality, however, Nixon's political career was far from over.

A Bumpy Road to the White House In 1968, Nixon made a spectacular political comeback by winning the Republican nomination for president. In what had been a troubled election year, the choice of Nixon as a candidate was one of many surprises and shocks. First, President Lyndon Johnson had unexpectedly decided not to run for reelection. Soon thereafter had followed the stunning assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy.

To add to the surprises, Alabama governor George Wallace mounted a strong campaign for president on the American Independent Party ticket. During civil rights struggles in his state, Wallace had been an ardent segregationist. His resistance to integration won him support from white voters in the South. Wallace also appealed to "the average man on the street" by attacking the "liberals, intellectuals, and long hairs [who] have run the country for too long."

A final shock to the nation came with the outbreak of violence in Chicago, Illinois, during the Democratic National Convention. Outside the convention, protesters opposed to the Vietnam War clashed with police, while inside, Vice President Hubert Humphrey won the Democratic nomination on a prowar platform. The Democratic Party left the convention anything but united.

These troubling events left many Americans fearful that the country was falling apart. Recognizing this concern, Nixon made it central to his campaign. As he put it, "We live in a deeply troubled and profoundly unsettled time. Drugs, crime, campus revolts, racial discord, draft resistance—on every hand we find old standards violated, old values discarded." In his campaign, he depicted himself as the champion of the many ordinary people who worked hard, paid their taxes, and loved their country. Nixon appealed to their desire for stability by promising a renewed commitment to "law and order."

To win votes in what had long been the solidly Democratic South, Nixon implemented a "southern strategy." For a running mate, he chose a southern governor, Spiro T. Agnew, of Maryland. Agnew was known for his tough stand against racial violence and urban crime. Nixon also reached out to conservative southern voters with talk of respect for states' rights and a smaller federal government, which were traditionally valued by southern Democrats.

The election proved to be very close. Nixon won with just 43.4 percent of the popular vote. In five Southern states, Wallace won a **plurality** of votes—not a majority but more than any other candidate. Democrats also maintained control of Congress. Because Nixon lacked both a strong electoral mandate and a Republican majority in Congress, it was not clear whether he would be able to lead the country the way he wanted.

Nixon's Domestic Policies: A Conservative and Liberal Blend Having won the presidency by a narrow margin, Nixon tried to appeal to conservatives and liberals once in office. He reached out to conservatives with a plan, called **New Federalism**, to reduce the size and power of the federal government. "After a third of a century of power flowing from the people and the states to Washington," Nixon explained, "it is time for a New Federalism in which power, funds, and responsibility will flow from Washington to the people."

The centerpiece of Nixon's New Federalism was a proposal called **revenue sharing**. Under revenue sharing, the federal government distributed tax revenues to states and local governments to spend as they saw fit. State and local leaders liked the practice because it gave them more funds as well as the power to spend those funds where most needed. Revenue sharing proved to be popular with conservatives.

However, Nixon was less successful at shrinking the federal government. He did do away with some of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society bureaucracy, including the Office of Economic Opportunity. At the same time, though, Nixon expanded several social benefit programs. He increased Social Security and enlarged the Food Stamp Program.

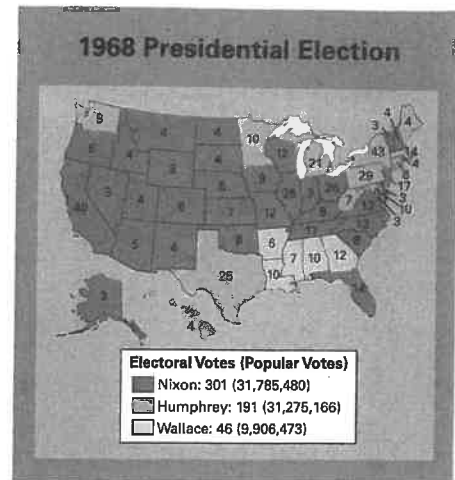
Nixon went on to increase the size and power of the government by signing new federal agencies into existence. One was the **Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)**. He charged OSHA with protecting workers on the job. He also established the **Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)** in order "to protect human health and to safeguard the natural environment."

Nixon's most surprising initiative was the **Family Assistance Plan**. Under this proposed plan, the government would support every poor family with a minimum annual income. To get this support, family members able to work would be required to seek employment. The Family Assistance Plan would have greatly expanded the number of families eligible for public assistance.

Nixon thought this program would appeal to liberals. He also hoped the increased responsibility for running welfare programs that it gave the states would interest conservatives. Instead, conservatives attacked the plan as a reward for laziness. Liberals denounced its proposed guaranteed income as too little to live on. After much debate, Congress rejected the plan.

A Mixed Record on Civil Rights Nixon's civil rights policies were as mixed as the rest of his domestic agenda. In pursuit of his "southern strategy," he sought to appoint conservative southern judges to the Supreme Court. His first two choices had records of supporting segregation. The Senate rejected them both. Nixon also called for changes to the Voting Rights Act when it came up for renewal in 1970. Congress rejected his proposals, which would have reduced federal oversight of voting officials in the South. Nonetheless, he resigned the Voting Rights Act into law.

At the same time, Nixon sought to increase economic opportunities for African Americans by expanding affirmative action. Under the Philadelphia Plan, he required construction companies working on federally funded projects to hire specific numbers of minority workers. He also encouraged "black capitalism" by providing federal assistance to black-owned businesses.



When Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, he commented, "I think we just delivered the South to the Republicans for a long time to come." In 1968, his prediction began to prove true. Democrat Hubert Humphrey won only one southern state. Segregationist George Wallace won five, and Republican Richard Nixon carried the rest of the southern states.

Teen Workers!
You have a right to a safe and healthy workplace.

- Know your workplace rights.
- Talk to your employer about safety and health issues at work.
- Stay alert and work safely.
- Get safety and health training.
- Visit the OSHA Teen Workers website at www.osha.gov/teens

OSHA Occupational Safety and Health Administration
U.S. Department of Labor

OSHA is the federal agency that helps ensure the safety and health of all workers, including teens, on the job. OSHA provides information, resources and guidance to employers and employees.

For more information, talk to your employer or call
1-800-321-OSHA
www.osha.gov/teens
(TTY) 1-877-688-6227

The Nixon administration founded the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Today, this organization continues to work to ensure safe workplaces for Americans.



In response to the 1973 oil embargo, Congress enacted the National Maximum Speed Law. This law required states to impose a 55 mph speed limit on all roads if they wanted to receive federal highway funds. At first the lower speed limit seemed to increase highway safety, but this effect was short-lived. In 1995, Congress returned control of highway speed limits to the states.

Struggling with a Stagnant Economy Throughout his presidency, Nixon struggled with the nation's economic problems. In 1970, the United States entered a recession. Normally, during a recession, unemployment rises, wages drop, and consumers spend less money. To encourage people to buy goods, companies lower their prices. As prices drop, people start spending again. Then business activity picks up, and eventually the recession ends. However, this is not what happened in the early 1970s. Instead, the nation experienced an economic condition known as **stagflation**. Unemployment rose, just as it would in a normal recession. But prices also increased at an alarming rate. Americans found themselves living with both a stagnant economy and rapid inflation.

Nixon responded to stagflation in two ways. First, he attacked inflation with a three-phase program. In Phase I, he froze wages and prices for 90 days. In Phase II, he authorized a new federal agency to strictly limit future wage and price increases. He then turned to unemployment. He increased government spending to put more money into the economy. As a result, joblessness fell. Nixon then moved to Phase III of his inflation plan, replacing strict wage and price controls with voluntary guidelines. Unfortunately, with controls lifted, the nation suffered its most rapid rise in cost of living since World War II's end.

To make matters even worse, in the fall of 1973, oil-exporting nations in the Middle East stopped shipping oil to the United States. They established this oil embargo to protest U.S. support for Israel in conflicts between Israel and Arab nations. The result was a nationwide **energy crisis**. To conserve dwindling supplies, the government urged homeowners to lower their thermostats. It also reduced highway speed limits to 55 miles per hour. The crisis did not ease until the Middle Eastern nations lifted the ban the following year.

53.3 President Nixon's Foreign Policy Record

Early in his political career, Richard Nixon had made a name for himself as a staunch opponent of communism. As president, however, he was determined to reshape America's containment policy. He hoped to replace endless conflict with a stable world order in which the superpowers could coexist peacefully.

Nixon's Realistic Approach to Foreign Affairs Nixon based his foreign policy on **realpolitik**, a German term that means "the politics of reality." It refers to politics based on practical rather than idealistic concerns. Nixon's top foreign policy adviser, Henry Kissinger, backed him in this realistic approach.

As part of their *realpolitik* approach, Nixon and Kissinger concluded that the United States could no longer bear the full burden of defending the free world. Addressing the nation in 1969, the president laid out his plan, which became known as the Nixon Doctrine. He promised that the United States would continue to protect its allies from Soviet or Chinese nuclear attacks. In other cases of aggression, however, the United States would expect the nation at risk to do more to help itself. The president's plan for Vietnamization of the war in Southeast Asia was an early application of the new Nixon Doctrine.

The president also applied the Nixon Doctrine in the Persian Gulf region of the Middle East. With their vast deposits of oil, Persian Gulf nations had become increasingly important to the United States. However, the United

States had no military forces stationed in the region. Rather than try to move troops in, Nixon sent military aid to Iran and Saudi Arabia. With this aid, he hoped these allies would take on the responsibility of keeping the region peaceful and stable. At the same time, the United States continued to support its closest ally in the Middle East, Israel, with both military and financial aid.

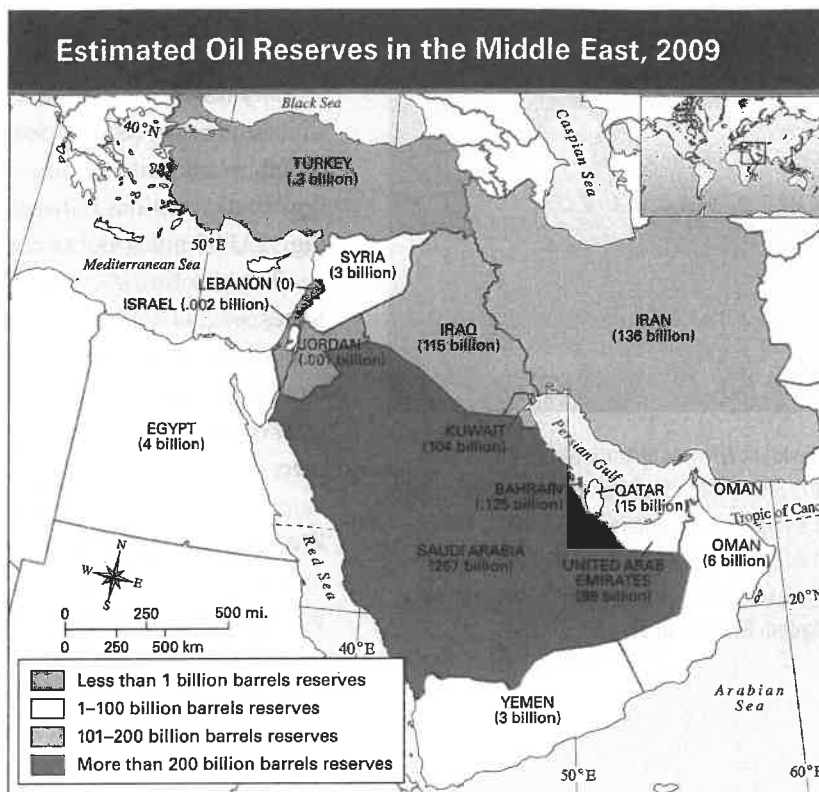
The limits of the Nixon Doctrine became clear when Israel was attacked by a coalition of Arab countries led by Egypt and Syria during the Yom Kippur holy days in October 1973. The Yom Kippur War lasted just three weeks, but that was long enough to trigger the oil embargo. Despite receiving American aid, Saudi Arabia backed the embargo to punish the United States for its long-standing support of Israel.

In dealings with the Soviet Union and communist China, Nixon and Kissinger pursued a policy of **détente**. *Détente* is a French word that means a relaxation of tension or hostility. To many conservatives, *détente* seemed inconsistent with Nixon's earlier anticommunism. Some also saw it as a sellout of U.S. interests and ideals. Most liberals, however, applauded any policy that had the potential to prevent a nuclear holocaust.

Opening Diplomatic Relations with China The policy of *détente* brought a dramatic change in U.S. interactions with China. When Nixon took office in 1969, the United States did not engage in diplomatic relations with China. Nor did it officially recognize the communist government that had ruled mainland China since 1949. Nixon believed that the policy of isolating China had worn out its usefulness. In 1970, he reported to Congress that it was in America's national interest to improve "practical relations with Peking [Beijing]."

The president had several reasons for wanting better relations with China. One was the sheer size of that nation—one fifth of the world's population lived in China. In addition, Nixon had watched the relationship between China and the Soviet Union change from one of communist comrades to one of hostile neighbors. He believed that establishing friendly diplomatic relations with China might pressure Soviet leaders, who feared Chinese power, to cooperate more with the United States.

In April 1971, a sporting event opened the way for *détente*. The Chinese government had invited a U.S. table tennis team to play in Beijing. The 15 team members were the first Americans to visit Beijing since the communists took power. Chinese leaders treated the American athletes as though they were ambassadors. At a meeting with the team, Chinese Premier Chou En-lai stated that the athletes' arrival in China marked a new chapter in U.S.-China relations.



More than half of the world's proven crude oil reserves lie in the Middle East. Proven reserves are known deposits of petroleum that can be pumped at a reasonable cost.

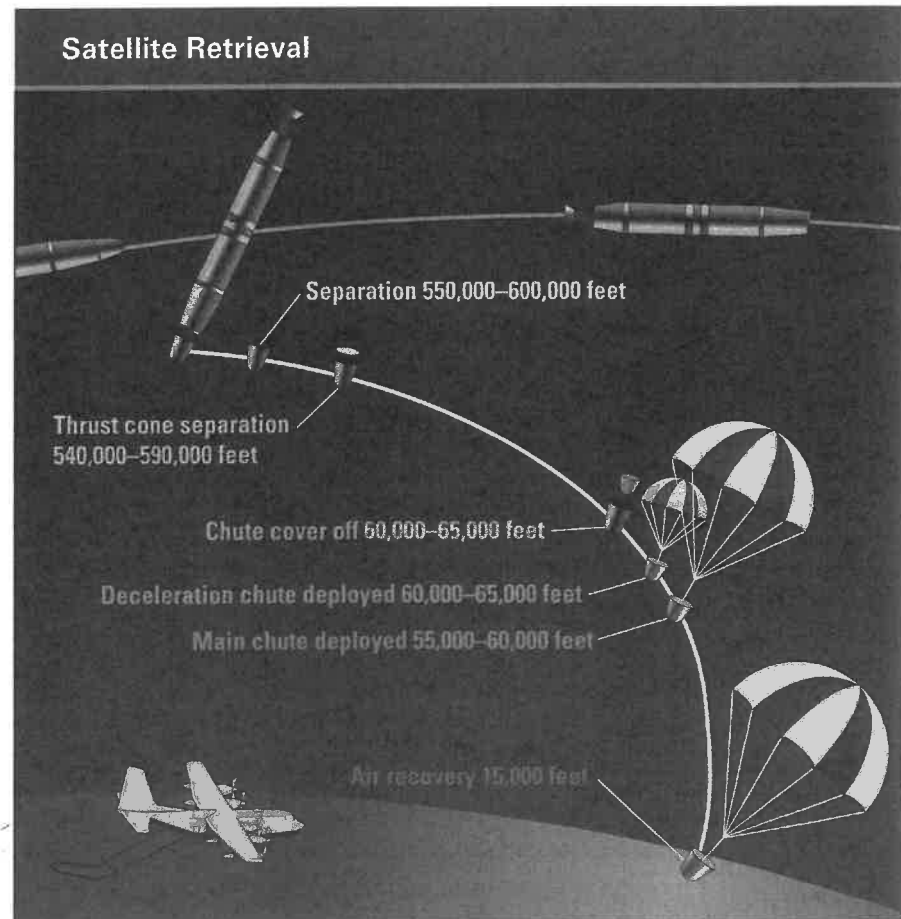


President Nixon's historic trip to China in 1972 marked the first visit by a U.S. president to a communist country. While there, Nixon attempted to establish friendly relations with Chinese leaders. Here, Nixon converses with Madame Mao at an opera.

Shortly after the table tennis competition, Nixon announced proposals to begin trade and travel between the two countries. Two months later, Kissinger secretly traveled to China. In July 1971, Nixon announced that he would visit China the next year. The following February, Nixon and his wife, Pat, made an official state visit to China. While there, Nixon pledged to establish formal diplomatic relations between the two countries. He described the trip as bridging "12,000 miles and twenty-two years of noncommunication and hostility."

The historic visit marked a turning point in relations between the United States and the world's largest communist nation. The trip led to the communist government, based in Beijing, taking over China's seat in the United Nations. Until that time, the Nationalist government of Taiwan had occupied China's seat. In 1973, the United States and China opened information offices in each other's capitals. By 1979, the two countries engaged in full diplomatic relations.

Working Toward Détente with the Soviet Union Nixon's expectation that by improving relations with China he could push the USSR toward détente proved accurate. Just three months after visiting China, Nixon embarked on another historic journey. In May 1972, he became the first American president to visit Moscow, the capital of the USSR. Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev had invited Nixon partly in response to Soviet concerns about U.S. involvement with China. The invitation had also revealed Brezhnev's desire to receive U.S. economic and technological aid.



During the 1960s, U.S. and Soviet engineers equipped satellites with long-range cameras to create "spies in the sky." The spy satellites would eject canisters of undeveloped film back toward Earth. When a canister reached the upper atmosphere, a parachute on it opened. An airplane would catch the canister in midair.

Brezhnev and Nixon were able to negotiate a trade deal that benefited both countries. The United States agreed to sell to the USSR at least \$750 million worth of grain over a three-year period. The grain deal helped the people of the Soviet Union, which was not growing enough grain to feed its population. It also helped American farmers, who were happy to sell their surplus grain.

The two leaders then negotiated a much more difficult agreement—to limit the number of nuclear missiles in their arsenals. Such an agreement had been made possible by the development of spy satellites in the 1960s. Cameras mounted on these satellites took photographs that, when sent back to Earth, allowed the two countries to monitor each other's missile sites. The **Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT)**, later called SALT I, was a five-year agreement. The treaty limited the USSR to 1,618 missiles and the United States to 1,054. The United States accepted the smaller number because its missiles were more advanced. The deal applied to both ground-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). In addition, Nixon and Brezhnev signed a statement of “basic principles,” which called on both of the superpowers to “do their utmost to avoid military confrontations.”

Nixon was pleased with this first agreement to halt the arms race. “The historians of some future age,” he predicted, “will write . . . that this was the year when America helped to lead the world up out of the lowlands of constant war, and to the high plateau of lasting peace.” Over time, however, hope that détente would lead to an era of cooperation between the superpowers began to fade. The USSR continued to support armed struggles in the Third World. It also began arming its missiles with multiple warheads in order to work around the treaty's limits. As a result, conservative critics of détente concluded that the Soviet Union should never be trusted again.

53.4 Watergate Ends Nixon's Career

On June 17, 1972, five men broke into the offices of the Democratic National Committee in Washington, D.C. A security guard at the Watergate building, where the offices were located, caught the men. But the burglars were unusual—they wore suits and carried bugging, or wiretapping, devices. Further investigation showed that they had ties to Nixon's reelection campaign.

Early news reports of the break-in did not stop Nixon from winning the 1972 presidential election by a landslide. But the bungled burglary and attempts to cover it up would eventually lead to Nixon's fall from power.

Abusing Power to Limit Dissent At first, the Watergate burglars' intentions were unclear. Their actions, however, were part of a larger pattern of abuse of presidential power. Nixon tended to view critics of his policies as a threat to national security. Once elected, he developed an “enemies list” that included reporters, politicians, activists, and celebrities whom he viewed as being unfriendly to his administration. He authorized the FBI to tap the phones of news reporters whom he felt were biased against him. He even ordered phone tapping of members of his own staff whom he distrusted. All these wiretaps were unconstitutional, and thus an abuse of power, because a judge had not properly authorized them.

At the height of the scandal, Nixon released recordings of the White House conversations on the break-in. On one tape, a conversation between Nixon and an aide was replaced by 18.5 minutes of silence. This revelation caused many Americans to grow skeptical of political leaders. Here, a demonstrator calls for the impeachment of Nixon.





Rather than face impeachment, Richard Nixon resigned from the presidency in August 1974. Most Americans felt that his fall from power showed that the Constitution works. The legislative branch led the way by investigating Nixon's role in the Watergate cover-up. The judicial branch did its part by forcing Nixon to release his Oval Office tapes.

The president also showed grave concern for secrecy. He set up his own White House security operation to investigate leaks of damaging information to the press. The group received the nickname "the plumbers," because their main job was to "plug" leaks. In 1971, the plumbers had broken into the office of a psychiatrist whose clients included Daniel Ellsberg, a former defense analyst. Nixon had suspected Ellsberg of leaking the Pentagon Papers, a set of secret military documents on the Vietnam War, to the *New York Times*. A year later, it was the White House plumbers who carried out the botched Watergate burglary.

The Watergate Scandal Unfolds The break-in might have been forgotten after Nixon's reelection if not for the work of two *Washington Post* reporters. Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein would not let the matter drop. With the help of an anonymous source, whom they called Deep Throat, they discovered that Nixon's reelection campaign had paid the plumbers to bug the Democrats' offices. More details came out when the plumbers faced trial in 1973. During the legal proceedings, one of them implicated the Nixon administration in a cover-up. He reported that the defendants had been paid to lie to protect government officials.

At this point, what the White House had tried to dismiss as a "third-rate burglary" had turned into the **Watergate scandal**. Pressure to thoroughly investigate the scandal increased. The Justice Department appointed Archibald Cox, a respected law professor, to serve as **special prosecutor** in the case. A special prosecutor is a lawyer from outside the government whom the attorney general or Congress appoints to investigate a federal official for misconduct while in office.

After the plumbers' trial, the Senate formed a committee to investigate the Watergate affair. In televised hearings, former White House counsel John Dean testified that Nixon had been involved in efforts to cover up White House links to the Watergate break-in. Another former Nixon aide revealed that President Nixon had installed a recording system in the White House Oval Office that taped every conversation Nixon had there. If the committee could hear those tapes, it would find out whether the president had ordered a cover-up.

In July 1973, the Senate Watergate Committee issued a **subpoena**, or court order, compelling Nixon to turn over several tapes. Nixon refused, invoking a right to withhold information known as **executive privilege**. The concept of executive privilege is based in the constitutional separation of powers. Presidents since George Washington's day have argued that separation of powers gives the executive branch the right to operate without having to reveal to the other branches the details of every conversation or working document.

Over the next few months, Nixon battled both Special Prosecutor Cox and the Senate Committee over the release of the White House tapes. In October 1973, in what became known as the "Saturday Night Massacre," Nixon fired Cox. Nixon's own attorney general then resigned in protest.

That same month, for reasons unrelated to Watergate, Vice President Spiro Agnew resigned. He left office to avoid facing trial on charges of accept-

ing bribes and evading taxes while governor of Maryland. Nixon appointed Gerald Ford, Republican minority leader in the House of Representatives, to be Agnew's successor as vice president.

In July 1974, in the case of *United States v. Nixon*, the Supreme Court ruled that the president must release his tapes to the Senate. Once released, the recordings proved beyond a doubt that he had ordered a Watergate cover-up.

Nixon Resigns in Disgrace Late in July, the House Judiciary Committee approved three articles of impeachment against Nixon. The articles accused him of obstruction of justice, abuse of power, and contempt of Congress. Rather than face trial and almost certain conviction in the Senate, Nixon announced his resignation on August 8, 1974. On August 9, Vice President Gerald Ford was sworn in as president. "Our Constitution works," Ford said. "Our long national nightmare is over."

In September, Ford issued Nixon a presidential pardon. Ford hoped the pardon would help unify the country by putting the Watergate mess to rest. Instead, it aroused controversy. Some Americans wanted to see Nixon tried for his alleged crimes. Others preferred to move on from Watergate. Despite Ford's efforts to close this unhappy chapter of presidential history, the nation remained deeply disillusioned with political leadership.

Summary

Richard Nixon won the presidency in 1968. While in office, he made strides toward easing the tensions of the Cold War. He also saw many of his domestic policies enacted. However, scandal forced him to resign in disgrace in 1974.

New Federalism Nixon came into office determined to revive federalism. He hoped to reduce the power of the federal government and return power to the states. Revenue sharing, central to his plan, allowed state and local governments to spend tax revenues as they saw fit.

Occupational Safety and Health Administration Despite his promise to shrink the federal government, Nixon created OSHA, which works to improve health and safety in the workplace.

Environmental Protection Agency Another new agency, the EPA, was created to protect Americans' health and the natural environment.

Energy crisis Nixon tried to revive a stagnant economy with increased spending while fighting inflation with wage and price controls. However, an energy crisis made a bad situation worse.

Détente Nixon tried to encourage détente, or a relaxation of Cold War tensions. In 1972, he visited both communist China and the Soviet Union.

Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty In 1972, Nixon and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev signed SALT I, the first superpower treaty to place limits on the arms race.

Watergate scandal In 1972, burglars broke into Democratic headquarters in the Watergate building. The scandal over the cover-up that followed the break-in led to Richard Nixon's resignation in 1974.