

America in the Post-Watergate Era:

Politics of Distrust and the Myth of Ronald Reagan

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Chapter 1: Foundations of Distrust

One of the most interesting facets of American politics is that the name of every current political scandal receives the suffix “gate” attached to the end. This pattern goes back to the Watergate Scandal. Stephanie Slocum-Schaffer states that Watergate had a significant impact on the 1970’s and the rest of the century. She argues that Watergate caused the public to see government service as ignoble but that it also proved that the American system of checks and balances could effectively contain corruption.¹ Ted Sorensen, a former Kennedy speechwriter and advisor, stated that Watergate significantly effected every subsequent presidential administration. He stated that:

Removing the perpetrators of Watergate, even without altering the environment in which they operate, should teach some future White House occupants the necessity of not trying something similar. But it may only teach others the necessity of not being caught. History has never proven to be a strong deterrent.²

These accounts make it clear that Watergate completely reshaped the political system in the United States and fundamentally changed the way the Americans thought about the government.

Nixon’s abuse of power and the institutional corruption that later investigations uncovered shocked the American people and political elites. The historical trend of anti-statism in the Unites States, the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War and the extensive media coverage of the scandal obliterated public trust in the federal government by the end of the 1970’s. The first reaction to this lose of confidence was an outpouring

¹ Slocum-Schaffer, *America in the Seventies*, (Syrcause: Syracuse University Press, 2003) 207, 210-211.

² Theodore Sorensen, *Watchmen in the Night: Presidential Accountability after Watergate* (Cambridge : MIT University Press , 1975) 7.

of political advocacy and the passage of a series of political reform. These efforts focused on changing the way government operated to make it more transparent and accountable.

The major reforms that Watergate and the events of the 1960's and 1970's spawned were the War Powers Act, *US v. Nixon*, the Freedom of Information of Act, the Federal Elections Campaign Act, the Ethics in Government Act, and the results of Church Committee. These changes failed to restore the public's trust in the government. The political and policy problems of Presidents Ford and Carter in the 1970's completed the breakdown of American's confidence in the national political system. In the 1980's Ronald Reagan captured the post-Watergate distrust with a powerful anti-government message that shaped the politics of the United States for the next few decades. Reagan's influence and the renewal of prosperity and power that the country experienced during and in the immediate aftermath of his presidency caused many people to see him as a white knight who remade American society and politics in his image. However Reagan's success was built on the legacy of Watergate and the events of the 1970's. This background provides strong evidence to counter the growing myth that Reagan alone pushed Americans to adopt a more conservative view of the role government in the United States.

Historical Background

Distrust in government did not come about solely as a result of the events of the 1970's. It is actually rooted in the founding of the American political system. In the *Federalist Papers No. 1* Alexander Hamilton states:

After an unequivocal experience of the inefficiency of the subsisting federal government, you are called upon to deliberate on a new Constitution for the United States of America. The subject speaks its own importance; comprehending in its consequences nothing less than the existence of the Union, the safety and

welfare of the parts of which it is composed, the fate of an empire in many respects the most interesting in the world ³

Hamilton was referring to the failures of the first American government under the Articles of Confederation and the founding fathers attempt to restore public trust by reforming the American system of governance through the creation of the current US Constitution. Garry Wills states that Americans have always viewed government with suspicion and as a necessary evil. He demonstrates that public distrust of government has influenced the US political system since the early days of the republic.⁴ He does not directly address Watergate but he does discuss the role of distrust in government in the 1970's. He says that the historically negative view of government in the United States caused a strong reaction against many of the abuses of the Johnson Administration during the Vietnam War.⁵ This background influenced the way the public responded to Watergate. It strengthened the natural public reaction to the clear evidence of abuse of the Nixon Administration.

The civil rights movement also prevented the public from holding a positive view of the political system in the 1970's. African Americans, lead by organizations such as the NAACP and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, demanded equal rights for racial minorities in the United States. Many other liberal groups, especially students and young people, also joined in this struggle. The Supreme Court responded by ordering racial integration in public schools in the case of *Brown vs. Board of Education*.

³ Alexander Hamilton, *The Federalist Papers No. 1*, Yale Law School: The Avalon Project 27 October 1787, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed01.asp (accessed 10 April 2012).

⁴ Garry Wills, *A Necessary Evil: A History of American Distrust of Government* (New York : Simon and Schuster , 1999) 1-10.

⁵ Wills, *A Necessary Evil: A History of American Distrust of Government*, 310-314.

Eventually Congress passed several civil rights laws including the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. The Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson Administrations became involved to varying degrees to support the movement.⁶ However these responses did not satisfy many civil rights activists. Malcolm X declared, “This government has failed us, the government itself has failed us.” He argued that African Americans should adopt a program of Black Nationalism and attempt to achieve their goals through separation and independent struggle.⁷ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall confirms this view of government among civil rights activists. She states that the civil rights movement did topple the system of segregation in the US but that it also created a great deal of anger towards the federal government. This anger manifested itself in an increasingly violent black power movement and in race riots across the country.⁸

In the aftermath of the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, southern states launched a furious campaign to oppose racial integration. Alabama and Mississippi both set up state agencies known as State Sovereignty Commissions to actively block the implementation of the ruling. In addition southern state leaders and local politicians spoke out vehemently against federal intervention to change the status quo in the South. Police, fire fighters, and many other government officials reacted to activities and individuals promoting civil rights with violence and intimidation. Segregation in

⁶ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *The Journal of American History* 91 No. 4, (March 2005)1233-1263.

⁷ Malcolm X, *Ballot or the Bullet*, 12 April 1964, Detroit, <https://epress.anu.edu.au/reference/archive/malcolm-x/index.htm> (accessed 10 April 2012).

⁸ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *The Journal of American History* 91 No. 4, (March 2005)1234-1237.

businesses and other social organizations remained strong.⁹ Southern members of Congress opposed civil rights legislation and federal intervention.¹⁰ Several groups like the Klu Klux Klan engaged in unofficial and organized campaigns of violence against civil rights activists, African Americans, and other minority groups.¹¹

In June 1963 Alabama Governor George Wallace gave a famous speech opposing the racial integration of Alabama public schools and President Kennedy's nationalization of the National Guard to enforce the order. He stated:

The unwelcomed, unwanted, unwarranted and force-induced intrusion upon the campus of the University of Alabama today of the might of the Central Government offers frightful example of the oppression of the rights, privileges and sovereignty of this State by officers of the Federal Government. This intrusion results solely from force, or threat of force, undignified by any reasonable application of the principle of law, reason and justice. It is important that the people of this State and nation understand that this action is in violation of rights reserved to the State by the Constitution of the United States and the Constitution of the State of Alabama. While some few may applaud these acts, millions of Americans will gaze in sorrow upon the situation existing at this great institution of learning.¹²

This quote captures the powerful negative feelings of conservative whites towards the involvement of the federal government in the civil rights movements. They saw the intervention as a threat to their way of life and the established social order in the south. This feeling changed southern whites from a once prominent part of the Democrat's New Deal Coalition to fierce opponents of the federal government. This laid the foundation for the shift of the south to the Republican Party, Nixon's appeal to this group with his

⁹ Joseph Luders, "Civil Rights Success and the Politics of Racial Violence," *Polity* 37, No. 1, Fashion for Democracy (Jan., 2005) 108-129.

¹⁰ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History* 91 No. 4, (March 2005)1233-1263.

¹¹ Bernard Headley, "The 'Atlanta Tragedy' and the Rule of Official Ideology," *Journal of Black Studies* 18 No. 4, (Jun., 1988) 452-470.

¹² George Wallace, "School House Door Speech," Alabama Department of Archives and History 11 June 1963.

southern strategy, and Reagan's electoral and political dominance among conservative Democrats and southern whites.¹³

The legislative battles over civil rights laws and the fights between government authorities, civil rights groups, and white supremacist groups like the KKK undermined confidence in the federal government. To liberals and minorities, these conflicts displayed the government's long standing ambivalence towards social inequalities in the United States and weakened their faith in the justice of the political system. To conservatives especially in the south, the civil rights movement represented a government intrusion that threatened their way of life. These political conflicts divided the public and strengthened distrust in government that Watergate eventually highlighted in the 1970's.

The Vietnam War also played a large role in shaping the reaction of the public to the Watergate Scandal. Tom Wicker in a *New York Times* editorial in May 1974 argued that Watergate and Vietnam significantly changed the way Americans saw government. He stated that, "in the sixties for millions of Americans, the war in Vietnam and its consequent deceptions and disillusionment first brought the office into distrust and contempt. Now the Watergate scandal is bound to extend that corrosion of confidence."¹⁴ Watergate and the Vietnam War together significantly weakened the institution of the Presidency by the end of the Nixon Administration.

The Vietnam War was not a factor in public opinion until approximately 1965, when the United States increased its troop commitment during the Johnson Administration. The war began with 61 percent public support but this fell to 36 percent

¹³ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History* 91 No. 4, (March 2005)1233-1263.

¹⁴ Tom Wicker, "Vietnam and the Watergate Scandal," *New York Times*, 4 May 1973, <http://www.proquest.com> (accessed March 21, 2012).

by 1970. An analysis of the public opinion of the war found a steady decrease in support due mainly to rising casualties and the bloody nature of the conflict. Johnson's inability to end the war lowered his approval rating and limited the ability of any president to conduct the war.¹⁵ Arnold Isaacs argues that the most important legacy of the Vietnam War was its impact on the perceptions of the United States. He states that the failure of the United States to accomplish its goals in Vietnam caused many people to question the ability of the government to achieve any stated aim.¹⁶ Richard Nixon attempted to reverse this feeling after he became President in 1968. He campaigned on a promise to bring an honorable peace to Vietnam and gave a speech on his policy of "Vietnamization." He stated that he would shift the burden of the war onto the Vietnamese.¹⁷ These policies initially earned him public support but the war eventually wore down his credibility because the public was very reluctant to put any more resources into a war that already seemed lost.¹⁸

The final blows to public support for Nixon's policies in Vietnam were the revelations of Nixon's secret bombing campaign in Cambodia, the release of the Pentagon Papers and the growing intensity of the anti-war movement. While Nixon was attempting to bring the war to a swift end in order to avoid the same drain of public support that Johnson experienced, he ordered a secret bombing campaign in Cambodia.

¹⁵ John Mueller, "Trends in Popular Support for the Wars in Vietnam and Korea," *The American Political Science Review*, 1973.

¹⁶ Arnold Issacs, *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press , 1983) 494-496.

¹⁷ Richard Nixon, "Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam," 3 November 1969. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2303> (accessed 12 April 2012).

¹⁸ Andrew Katz, *Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: The Nixon Administration and the Pursuit of Peace with Honor in Vietnam* (Presidential Studies Quarterly , 1997) 500-507.

Eventually US troops went into the country itself and the *New York Times* revealed the bombing campaign in 1969. The leak about Cambodia increased Nixon's paranoia about the press and led to his administration's attempts to plug leaks that would characterize many of the Watergate crimes. Nixon's policies in Cambodia led to widespread protests across the United States, especially on college campuses. These protests tragically escalated at Kent State in Ohio, when National Guard troops attacked college students and caused several deaths.¹⁹ Thomas Powers in 1973 described the Nixon Administration's response to this tragedy as cold and tepid. He stated that Nixon's Attorney General John Mitchell criticized the shootings but did not investigate them for more than a year. He argued that the government did nothing because, "The Justice Department ignored the results of its own investigation because the President, Vice President, and the Attorney General attacked student activists as ideological hoodlums." This event provided strength to the growing anti-war movement and further damaged Nixon's credibility.²⁰

In 1971, the *New York Times* released the Pentagon Papers, which detailed the attempts by the Johnson Administration to deliberately mislead the public and Congress about his policies in Vietnam.²¹ The *Times Magazine* cover story at the time argued that the release of the Pentagon papers damaged the Nixon Administration because Nixon fought to prevent the *New York Times* from releasing the document. This increased suspicion of Nixon's own actions during the war, especially in light of his policies in

¹⁹ Slocum-Schaffer, *America in the Seventies*, 12-13; 100-104.

²⁰ Thomas Powers, "The Truth About Kent State: A Challenge to the American Conscience. By Peter Davies and The Board..." *New York Times* 2 September 1973, <http://search.proquest.com/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/119822849/136047F0A333E162C1F/4?accountid=14434> (accessed 10 April 2012).

²¹ Slocum-Schaffer, *America in the Seventies*, 16-18.

Cambodia.²² Their release also resulted in the formation of the “Plumbers” who became infamous for their involvement in the Watergate break-in and cover up.²³

The growing anti-war protests also constrained the ability of political and policy figures in the Nixon Administration to achieve their foreign policy goals. The protests highlighted the secret bombing campaign and made it nearly impossible for Nixon to do anything other than withdraw troops from Vietnam. The media coverage of the anti-war movement undermined Nixon because it created a credibility gap between what Washington said was happening in Vietnam and what really was happening.²⁴ In 1981 former Vietnamese General Tran Van Nhut discussed the impact of Watergate on the Nixon Administration’s pursuit of peace in Vietnam. He stated:

At that time everybody thought that Mr. Nixon had the right to intervene in Vietnam. But after Watergate we realized that he did not have any power left...Concerning the stipulations of the Paris Agreement, we realized that there were many things, which were disadvantageous to the Republic of Vietnam. First of all, concerning, in the United States. Therefore, the American government had to rush into signing. First of all, Mr. Nixon forced Mr. Thieu to sign that Agreement. Secondly, the Vietnam War had dragged on for too long.²⁵

Watergate exacerbated the credibility gap in Vietnam and that Vietnamese were well aware of Nixon’s inability to continue the war. Consequently Watergate played an important role in undoing the United States policy in Vietnam. It forced President Nixon

²² Times Magazine, “Pentagon Papers: The Secret War,” 28 June 1971, <http://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1996/analysis/back.time/9606/28/index.shtml> (accessed 10 April 2012).

²³ Slocum-Schaffer, *America in the Seventies*, 16-18.

²⁴ Paul Joseph, "Direct and Indirect Impact of the Movement Against the Vietnam War," in *Essays on the History of the Vietnam War*, ed. Jayne Werner and Luu Doan Huynh (M.E. Sharpe Publishers, 1992) 169-171.

²⁵ Interview with Tran Van Nhut from *Vietnam: A Television History: The End of the Tunnel: 1973-1975*, (11 November 1981) on Open Vault, <http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/vietnam-5edaef-interview-with-tran-van-nhut-1981> (accessed April 2012).

to accept a quick peace to end the war and ended any possibility that he could continue the war.

The wars in Vietnam and Cambodia dragged on for years without any congressional approval. There was particular concern over Nixon's secret bombing of Cambodia and the extremely bloody nature of the conflict in Vietnam.²⁶ Eventually Congress passed the War Powers Act in 1973 to address these concerns. The law required the President to notify Congress of the deployment of US troops within forty-eight hours and forbade US troops from remaining engaged in a conflict for more than sixty days without authorization from Congress.²⁷ Nixon vetoed the original bill. He stated that the bill would undermine the foreign policy of the United States because it limited his ability to effectively command the military. He also said that he believed that the bill was unconstitutional and was particularly concerned about the provision that required the President to terminate military action within a certain time limit unless Congress approved it.²⁸ Congress overrode Nixon's veto and the bill became law.²⁹ While this reform did limit the power of the President it was not as effective as many originally believed that it would be. Every President since Nixon criticized the War Powers Act and

²⁶ Kathryn Olmsted, *Challenging the Secret Government: The Post-Watergate Investigations of the CIA and FBI* (Chapel Hill : The University of North Carolina Press , 1996) 1-27.

²⁷ Michael D. Freedman, *The Watergate Reforms: Ten Years Later* (Washington, D.C. : Common Cause, 1983), 28-30.

²⁸ Richard Nixon: "Veto of the War Powers Resolution," 24 October 24 1973, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=4021> (accessed 11 April 2012).

²⁹ United Press International, "Congress Overrides Nixon Veto of Bill Limiting War Powers," *Times Union* 8 November 1973, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=72ZHAAAIBAJ&sjid=kHwMAAAAIBAJ&pg=3019,1056907&dq=congress+override+nixon+veto+of+war+powers&hl=en> (accessed 11 April 2012).

many disregarded it when they pursued military action. Congress and the courts have never seriously challenged the overall military actions and policies of a sitting president and the executive still dominates in the arena of foreign policy.

Overall the Vietnam War weakened the power of the presidency in several important ways. An interview with Richard Holbrooke, a prominent American diplomat, emphasized the importance of the credibility gap in the United States. He argued that the Nixon Administration faced a significant challenge in the Vietnam because the public quickly realized that the information that policy makers in Washington were using to make decisions was false.³⁰ This drain on the political capital left Nixon less able to combat the negative perceptions of his actions during Watergate. The secret policies of the Johnson Administration revealed in the Pentagon Papers and the later revelations about Nixon's bombing campaigns in Cambodia confirmed many American's suspicions about the widespread abuse of presidential power. Vietnam caused the media to become very hostile towards Nixon, and this was very important, because the media played a pivotal role in the events of Watergate.

Immersion in the Public Consciousness

However while many scholars acknowledge the media as an important part of the public reaction to the scandal, many people argue that Nixon's personality was what made the problems presented by Watergate worse. Nixon was very paranoid. For example when he discussed his own presidential campaign he said, "We were bugged in '68 on the plane and bugged in '62, even running for governor, God-damnest thing you

³⁰ Interview with Richard C. Holbrooke, (December 1982) on Open Vault, <http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/vietnam-019ef6-interview-with-richard-c-holbrooke-2-1982>, (accessed April 2012).

ever saw.”³¹ Nixon’s paranoia and the fact that the President actively engaged in a cover up to hide his abuse of the intelligence services, the IRS, and flagrant violations of domestic campaign finance and transparency laws definitely heightened the impact of Watergate. The Articles of Impeachment drafted against him eventually described these crimes as:

On June 17, 1972, and prior thereto, agents of the Committee for the Re-election of the President committed unlawful entry of the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee in Washington, District of Columbia, for the purpose of securing political intelligence. Subsequent thereto, Richard M. Nixon, using the powers of his high office, engaged personally and through his close subordinates and agents, in a course of conduct or plan designed to delay, impede, and obstruct the investigation of such illegal entry; to cover up, conceal and protect those responsible; and to conceal the existence and scope of other unlawful covert activities.³²

The Ervin Committee, the Senate committee created to conduct the initial Watergate investigation and lead by Senator Sam Ervin, confirmed the seriousness of these allegations. Their final report accused Nixon’s friend C. G. Rebozo of using campaign funds, “to pay for various major improvements to the Nixon properties at Key Biscayne and for a pair of platinum-set diamond earrings that the President gave to Pat in 1972 for her 60th birthday.”³³ This corruption was serious but it does not entirely explain the effect that Watergate had on the political system in the United States. The endless media coverage and the televised congressional hearings are what made the scandal impossible

³¹ Stanley Kutler, *The Wars of Watergate: The Last Crisis of Richard Nixon* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990) 60.

³² U.S. Congress, "Articles of Impeachment Adopted by the House of Representatives Committee on the Judiciary," 27 July 27 1974, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*.
<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=76082>, (accessed 2 October 2012).

³³ Times Magazine, “The Nation: The Ervin Committee's Last Hurrah,” 22 July 1974, <http://www.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,942928-1,00.html> (accessed 11 April 2012).

to forget and what forged the widespread negative perception about government that eventually changed American politics forever.

John O'Connor of the *Baltimore Sun* stated in 1973 that the radio and television coverage of the Ervin Investigations had a significant impact on the way the public reacted to Watergate. He said:

The continuing radio and television coverage of Watergate illustrates television's strengths... a statement in print is one thing. The official statement on TV, punctuated with a facial tic or sweat on the upper lip is quite another. With some effort, a good writer can capture such details. Television does it effortlessly.³⁴

This statement captures the simple truth that people responded to the drama of Watergate more powerfully through the medium of television than they would have if the scandal had occurred before television became a common facet of American life.

Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein in the *Washington Post* began the media firestorm in 1972. In simple language they described the vast crimes of the administration during the 1972 election, which included:

Following members of Democratic candidates' families and assembling dossiers on their personal lives; forging letters and distributing them under the candidates' letterheads; leaking false and manufactured items to the press; throwing campaign schedules into disarray; seizing confidential campaign files; and investigating the lives of dozens of Democratic campaign workers.³⁵

These accusations eventually played out in dramatic fashion on television, and the media coverage only grew worse as more and more accusations became public.

³⁴ John O'Connor, "At last, TV finds its Watergate role," *Baltimore Sun*, 20 May 1973, [https://secure.pqarchiver.com/baltsun/access/1760117132.html?FMT=AI&type=historic&date=May+20%2C+1973&author=JOHN+J+O%27CONNOR&pub=The+Sun+\(1837-1985\)&desc=At+last%2C+TV+finds+its+Watergate+role](https://secure.pqarchiver.com/baltsun/access/1760117132.html?FMT=AI&type=historic&date=May+20%2C+1973&author=JOHN+J+O%27CONNOR&pub=The+Sun+(1837-1985)&desc=At+last%2C+TV+finds+its+Watergate+role) (accessed March 21, 2012).

³⁵ Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, "FBI Finds Nixon Aides Sabotaged Democrats," *Washington Post* 10 October 1972, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2002/06/03/AR2005111001232.html>, (accessed 5 March 2012).

Gladys Lang and Kurt Lang argue that television was the most effective medium to rally the public sentiment against Nixon because it allowed political elites in Congress to effectively highlight his corruption. Television also made scandal more powerful because Nixon strategists originally believed most of the public would not read the transcripts of the hearings and television easily removed this impediment. According to the Gallup Poll, 42 percent of Americans had a less favorable opinion of Nixon after watching the hearings while only 17 percent had a more favorable opinion of him. Over 60 percent of the public backed the congressional decision to demand direct access to the Watergate tapes. They also note that even people who did not watch the hearings probably saw the many news reports about them. Many major networks even hired actors to reenact the more dramatic moments of the Watergate testimony.³⁶

Thomas Kazee found that television was important because it helped shift perceptions of Nixon among people who were not interested in politics.³⁷ Louis Liebovich notes that Nixon was hampered by the testimony of his closest aides before the congressional committee. Their testimony cemented the impression that Nixon was personally involved in the scandal and that the White House was paranoid and corrupt.³⁸ David Halberstram, a *New York Times* reporter, in a 1979 interview connected Vietnam, the media, and Watergate:

I think that Vietnam is the beginning of a great connection to Watergate. And it means that, you know, that you can have, covering Watergate. In direct contrast to the dreadful job that they'd done in Vietnam. And they were emboldened to A) challenge the official version and secondly, to trust their own reporters in the

³⁶ Lang and Lang, "Polling on Watergate: The Battle for Public Opinion," 534-535.

³⁷ Thomas Kazee, "Television Exposure and Attitude Change: The Impact of Political Interest," in *The Public Opinion Quarterly* (Oxford University Press, 1981) 516.

³⁸ Louis Liebovich, *Richard Nixon, Watergate, and the Press: A Historical Retrospective*, 85.

field. And I think this is very important. I mean, there are two enormous connections. Here you have this super American government, highly centralized, you know, some people call the imperial presidency, enormous media possibilities of the presidency dominating everything else on the landscape.³⁹

This quote demonstrates that Vietnam pushed the press to investigate the later Watergate crisis and encouraged them to communicate Nixon's vast abuse of power. John Dean described the scandal as, "a cancer growing on the Presidency." He told Nixon that, "something had to be done about the cancer because it was growing daily and if there was not immediate surgery, it was going to kill the President himself."⁴⁰ This quote accurately described what eventually happened to Nixon. The nearly universal coverage of the Watergate investigations and the dramatic testimony on television made it impossible for any Americans to forget about the scandal and for the public to hold anything other than a negative impression of Nixon's actions. This reduced the public confidence in government in a way that was impossible without the advent of the modern media.

This historical distrust in government strengthened the public's reaction to the corruption of the Nixon Administration during Watergate. In the 1960's, the civil rights movement highlighted vast inequalities in American society and the government's inability to solve them. Conservatives especially in the South saw the civil rights movement and the federal response as a threat to their way of life. The Vietnam War strengthened the growing perception that the government was corrupt and incompetent and wore down the credibility of the presidency itself. Watergate and the media firestorm

³⁹ Interview with David Halberstam, 16 January 1979, from Open Vault, <http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/vietnam-2602a8-interview-with-david-halberstam-1979-part-5-of-5>, (accessed April 2012).

⁴⁰ John Dean, Testimony before the Watergate Committee, 1973, from US Capitol Visitor Center, <http://www.visitthecapitol.gov/Exhibitions/online/1945-to-present/senate-1945-present/uncovering-watergate/751-john-deans-testimony-before-the-watergate.html>, (accessed April 2012).

that surrounded it enhanced all of these prior negative feelings about government and together these events significantly eroded the public's confidence in the ability of the federal government to solve the nation's problems. They created a powerful desire for immediate change and political actors responded to this sentiment in a variety of ways during the rest of the 1970's.

Chapter 2 Reform and Revision in the Post-Watergate Era

In the immediate aftermath of the Watergate scandal and the social and political upheavals of the 1960's confidence in government was at an all time low. A poll commissioned by the Senate subcommittee on intergovernmental affairs in September of 1973 and carried out by Louis Harris, a prominent early pollster, found that public support for all major government institutions was below thirty five percent.⁴¹ This was the steepest decline in public confidence that Harris ever recorded.⁴² An editorial in the *Washington Post* in 1973 stated:

When one speaks about public confidence and trust, that is the heart of the matter: people are entitled to something more than confidence that their highest public officials do not break the law; they are also entitled to know that these officials do not lie and cheat and corrupt the institutions of government.⁴³

An article in the *New York Times* at the same time argued that Watergate demonstrated the need for the passage of far reaching political reforms to increase the accountability and openness of the national government.⁴⁴ Watergate created a demand to change the entire political landscape of the country to ensure that nothing like it would ever happen again. This desire first manifested in the rise of Common Cause and the passage of a series of reform measures that changed the way that the federal government operated.

Common Cause

⁴¹ The Associated Press, "Confidence in Government Sags," in *Daytona Beach Morning Journal*, 3 December 1973.

⁴² Lang and Lang, *The Battle for Public Opinion: The President, the Press, and the Polls During Watergate*.

⁴³ The Washington Post Co, "Watergate: The Unfinished Business," in *Washington Post* 1 May 1973.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/national/longterm/watergate/articles/050173-2.htm> (accessed 13 February 2012).

⁴⁴ Ron Speed, "The Third Administration," in *New York Times* 10 May 1973, <http://search.proquest.com/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/119922277/134FDE640475CAB6D49/40?accountid=14434> (accessed 11 February 2012).

Common Cause rose to prominence based the public desire to change the political system and eventually provided new independent oversight of government. John Gardner, a former Cabinet Secretary in the Johnson Administration, originally founded Common Cause in 1970 as a non-partisan citizen-based lobbying group focused on creating a more transparent government. In the letter in which he announced its creation Gardner stated:

The first thing Common Cause will do is to assist you to speak and act in behalf of legislation designed to solve the nation's problems. We are going to build a true citizens' lobby – a lobby concerned not with the advancement of special interests but with the well being of the nation. ... One of our aims will be to revitalize politics and government.”⁴⁵

Andrew McFarland argues that Common Cause was successfully founded for several basic reasons. The first was that many people were looking for a way to express dissatisfaction with the federal government's invasion of Cambodia and the shootings at Kent State but did not want to embrace some of the counter-cultural social practices of the more radical protestors. He argued that Common Cause provided the more moderate outlet that many people were looking for. Technology and the economic climate in the 1970's also encouraged donations to the organization by the middle class and made participation in Common Cause easier.⁴⁶

During the initial founding the organization had about 100,000 registered members but this figure fell by about fifteen percent by 1972. Membership rose from 1973 to 1974 until around the time of Nixon's resignation to a peak of over 300,000 people. McFarland described the Watergate period as the most successful in the organization's history and stated that recruiting members was so easy that the staff

⁴⁵ Common Cause, *Common Cause: History and Accomplishments*, <http://www.commoncause.org/site/pp.asp?c=dkLNK1MQIwG&b=4860205> (accessed 12 February 2012).

⁴⁶ Andrew McFarland, *Common Cause: Lobbying in the Public Interest*, 30-31.

actually had to adjust in later years to having to work to retain members. Even though participation did decline after Nixon's resignation Common Cause was able to maintain a steady membership of about 200,000 into the 1980's.⁴⁷ McFarland also notes that donations increased during the Watergate period and many people simply mailed in donations to the organization without any prompting.⁴⁸

In an editorial in the *New York Times* in 1971, Richard Halloran praised Common Cause as an interesting new organization that sought to change the way that the American government operated. He raised questions about its long-term viability and stated that many in Washington called the group "John Gardner's Lost Cause." In 1971 Common Cause was less than a year old in and had recently lost a battle with President Nixon to limit the amount of money spent on television ads in campaigns.⁴⁹ The group quickly became opponents of the Nixon Administration because they called for the immediate removal of all US troops from Vietnam.⁵⁰ They also sued the Democratic and Republican National Committees for violation of campaign finance laws in 1971 and Gardner was put onto Nixon's infamous "enemies list."⁵¹ Richard J. Malloy of *The Press-Courier* in 1975 stated that Common Cause's early political opposition to the Nixon Administration put it in a position to use Watergate as a springboard to successfully promote government transparency and campaign finance reform.⁵²

⁴⁷ Andrew McFarland, *Common Cause: Lobbying in the Public Interest*, 39-45.

⁴⁸ Andrew McFarland, *Common Cause: Lobbying in the Public Interest*, 38-45, 80.

⁴⁹ Richard Halloran, "The Idea Is That Politics Is Everybody's Business: Common Cause." *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times in New York Times*. 7 March 1971 (accessed 21 February 2012).

⁵⁰ John Gardner, *In Common Cause*, 128.

⁵¹ PBS, *Common Cause*, <http://www.pbs.org/johngardner/chapters/6.html>.

⁵² Richard Malloy, "Lobby Helps Chairmen Unseat Selves," *The Press-Courier* 26 January 1975,

Watergate also shaped the reasons that members became involved in Common Cause. In 1974 a poll of members of Common Cause, the top reasons given for joining were “a belief in its aims”, “Watergate/National Issues”, “John Gardner”, and “wanted to feel had a say in federal government.”⁵³ Lawrence Rothenberg and Constance Cook also both tried to answer the question of why people joined Common Cause. Rothenberg stated that people participated in Common Cause because the dues were low and they had similar policy objectives.⁵⁴ Cook concluded that people became members for three basic reasons: policy commitments, feeling of civic duty, and feeling of politically efficacy.⁵⁵ These results demonstrate that members of Common Cause were motivated by concerns about government highlighted in the 1970’s by Watergate and that they wanted to fight against Nixon’s numerous abuses of power and change the system that allowed them to happen.

A poll of members conducted by Peter Hart in 1976 found that members of Common Cause had a critical view of the federal government. They believed that the influence of special interests on government was too powerful and that the government needed to be more responsive to the will of the people. The majority of members did not think that the people who ran the government were the main problem.⁵⁶ These results demonstrate that people involved in Common Cause were not concerned only about one

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=CpNKAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=1iINAAAAIIBAJ&pg=7252,5565698&dq=gao+support+campaign+finance+reforms+1970's&hl=en>, (accessed 10 April 2012).

⁵³ Andrew McFarland, *Common Cause: Lobbying in the Public Interest*, 47.

⁵⁴ Lawrence Rothenberg, *Linking Citizens to Government: Interest Group Politics at Common Cause*, 94-95.

⁵⁵ Constance Cook, “Participation in Public Interest Groups: Membership Motivations,” in *American Political Science Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (1984), 425.

⁵⁶ Andrew McFarland, *Common Cause: Lobbying in the Public Interest*, 55-57.

person or event. They support the conclusion that Watergate was the catalyst that highlighted the problems associated with government in a very dramatic fashion.

The structure of the organization also demonstrated that its rise was closely tied to Watergate. McFarland describes the process of activism at Common Cause as “insider-outsider lobbying.” This process used Common Cause leadership and regional officers in several cities to spur members to action that was targeted at individual members of government or broader political institutions.⁵⁷ Lutzker states, “The Common Cause decision to avoid campaign contributions and to refrain from endorsing candidates has cut it off from devices that most see as very important in building and exercising influence.”⁵⁸ Common Cause also soon limited the amount of money it could receive to very small donations and refused to take corporate money or grants in any form.⁵⁹ This analysis demonstrates that Common Cause’s method of lobbying draws its power mainly from the participation of its members. This highlights the fact that members in the 1970’s felt that Washington had become too top-down and actively sought to change this through advocacy.

The last piece of evidence that ties Common Cause to distrust in the government caused by Watergate is the reaction to its activism. Their efforts pushed states and the federal governments to reform and the leadership of the organization captured the distrust of Washington to increase its membership and donations. Richard Mallory described Common Cause in 1975 as, “the single most effective voice for progressive reform in the halls of Congress” and state that it, “has become a potent force in the nation’s 50 state

⁵⁷ Andrew McFarland, *Common Cause: Lobbying in the Public Interest*, 67-74.

⁵⁸ P. Lutzker, *The Politics of Public Interest Groups: Causes in Action*, (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms , 1973) 174.

⁵⁹ Andrew McFarland, *Common Cause: Lobbying in the Public Interest*, 176.

legislatures.”⁶⁰ This underscores that Common Cause’s lobbying for political reforms increased its visibility and power. However even Common Cause could not escape the trap of citizen distrust even as they used it to further their agenda.

An FBI file from the 1970’s contains Common Cause mailings signed by Gardner that were sent to the FBI because many people believed the organization was suspicious and should be investigated. One person who sent the Common Cause leaflet to the FBI argued:

I received the enclosed in the mail today. It is well written and persuasive. I might buy it if I were disillusioned with out Government’s structure. When I was reading it, a red flag started waving. There may not ben any justification for my fears, but I will feel better if people who are trained to detect subversive activities are alerted to the possibility.⁶¹

The FBI sent the same response back to each and every person that stated, “the FBI is a strictly investigative agency of the Federal Government and, as such, neither makes evaluations nor draws conclusions as to the character or integrity of any organization, publication or individual.”⁶² This file highlights the fact that distrust was so pervasive that even Common Cause, which advocated for a more open government, was cause for suspicion among a great number of citizens.

⁶⁰ Richard Malloy, “Lobby Helps Chairmen Unseat Selves,” *The Press-Courier* 26 January 1975, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=CpNKAAAIBAJ&sjid=1iINAAAIBAJ&pg=7252,5565698&dq=gao+support+campaign+finance+reforms+1970's&hl=en>, (accessed 10 April 2012).

⁶¹ United States Federal Bureau of Investigationsm, “Common Cause/Citizens Lobbying Organization,” 22 July 2008. <http://nara-wayback-001.us.archive.org/peth04/20041015132010/http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/commoncause.htm> (accessed 13 February 2012).

⁶² United States Federal Bureau of Investigationsm, “Common Cause/Citizens Lobbying Organization,” 22 July 2008. <http://nara-wayback-001.us.archive.org/peth04/20041015132010/http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/commoncause.htm> (accessed 13 February 2012).

Common Cause represented a powerful response to the decline of public confidence in government. Common Cause grew at an unprecedented rate in both numbers and political influence based on the public's concern about government secrecy and corruption that Watergate highlighted. It eventually played a significant role in the passage of the post-Watergate reforms. Common Cause never again achieved the level of influence that it had in the 1970's but they are still politically active at both a national and state level. They began an unprecedented expansion of citizen-lobbies and watchdog groups that now includes organizations like the Center for Responsive Politics, Citizens for Ethics and Responsibility in Government, Citizens for Sunshine and a host of other groups. Together these groups now provide a level of independent oversight that was not present in the 1970's. While this outpouring of political advocacy represented a powerful reaction to Watergate and did provide an outlet for many concerned citizens, it still only involved a small percentage of the American public. This meant that the increase in political advocacy focused on government accountability alone could not fully address the distrust in government in the 1970's, and this paved the way for further attempts to address the continuing lack of confidence in the political system.

Post-Watergate Reforms

The more substantial and widespread attempt to address the public concern about government was the passage of series of political reforms in the 1970's. Common Cause, Congress, the Supreme Court, and the Carter and Ford Administrations supported these efforts to varying degrees. These reforms changed the entire way that the government operated and represented the most significant effort of political elites to restore public confidence in government. In 1975 a *Boston Globe* editorial stated the origin of the desire

for reform very clearly. It argued: "Watergate, it seems to me, shows how far our loose system can be distorted...What Mr. Nixon left was a blueprint for how it can be done. And not many safeguards have been written really to prevent another Watergate."⁶³ This editorial underscored the strong public desire for structural reforms to limit the ability of any president to abuse the power of the office again. Schudson argued that the changes were meant to conform to the "Post-Watergate morality." He said that this meant that the reforms were not a response to a specific violation but were based on the widespread perception that government was operating without enough public oversight.⁶⁴ These concerns became even more powerful as the 1970's wore on and the Ford and Carter Administrations continued to make political missteps and the efforts to pass the reforms and other legislation soured relations between Congress and the White House.

The first reform was the United States Supreme Court case of *U.S v. Nixon*. In October of 1973 President Nixon fired Archibald Cox as the Special Prosecutor investigating Watergate because Cox, "made it apparent that he [Cox] will not comply with the instruction I [Nixon] issued to him, through Attorney General Richardson." In his letter directing the Attorney General to fire Cox, Nixon further stated that he thought this action was necessary because the executive branch could not function if government employees did not follow the orders of the President.⁶⁵ Public outcry forced Nixon to

⁶³ Boston Globe, *Will decency prevail after Watergate?* (The New York Times Company: 14-January 1975, <http://ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/747786492?accountid=14434> (accessed February 2012).

⁶⁴ Michael Schudson, *Watergate in American Memory: How We Remember, Forget, and Construct the Past*, 158.

⁶⁵ Richard Nixon, "Letter Directing the Acting Attorney General To Discharge the Director of the Office of Watergate Special Prosecution Force," October 20, 1973. Online

appoint another special prosecutor, Leon Jaworski. In April 1974, Jaworski obtained a court order ordering Nixon to release information about former administration officials who were facing criminal charges resulting from the Watergate break-in and cover up. He refused to do this and his lawyer James St. Clair claimed that these materials were privileged. St. Clair argued that Nixon as president was constitutionally empowered under the separation of powers doctrine to shield communications between himself and those who helped him to carry out his duties.⁶⁶

Nixon had earlier refused to turn over similar evidence to the Ervin Committee and Archibald Cox. Ervin argued, “I am certain that the doctrine of separation of powers does not impose upon any President the duty or the power to undertake to separate a congressional committee from access to the truth concerning alleged criminal activities” The conflict between Congress, the Special Prosecutor and the President eventually turned into a court battle. The outcome was far from certain because while the Supreme Court recognized executive privilege as a legitimate concept, its exact nature and limits were not well defined at this point in time.⁶⁷ Nixon also made public statements in 1973 to reassure the public that he was innocent. He provided a detailed account of what supposedly happened during the scandal and stated that many of the conversations that the special prosecutor sought to obtain had never been recorded. He said, “I believe that

by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*.
<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=4018> (accessed 10 April 2012).

⁶⁶ Stanley Kutler, *The Wars of Watergate: The Last Crisis of Richard Nixon*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990) 443-460.

⁶⁷ Carroll Kilpatrick, “President Refuses to Turn Over Tapes; Ervin Committee, Cox Issue Subpoenas, Action Sets Stage for Court Battle on Powers Issue,” 24 July 1973 *The Washington Post*,
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/national/longterm/watergate/articles/072473-1.htm> (accessed 11 April 2012).

when the court concludes its evaluation of the testimony and documentary evidence, public doubt on this issue will be completely removed.”⁶⁸ Even while Nixon was attempting to restore the American people’s confidence in his presidency, the evidence that would eventually force his resignation and prove him a liar was moving closer to being revealed.

The case made it to the United States Supreme Court and in a unanimous decision the court ruled against Nixon and ordered him to turn over the tapes. The court stated, “the allowance of the privilege to withhold evidence that is demonstrably relevant in a criminal trial would cut deeply into the guarantee of due process of law and gravely impair the basic function of the courts.” They argued that the president did have a basic privilege associated with his constitutional duties but this protection did not preclude him from turning over evidence of criminal conduct.⁶⁹ The Supreme Court has historically stayed out of political conflicts between the legislative and executive branch and Watergate, at this point, was an intensely partisan conflict. St. Clair argued that the scandal was not an area within the courts jurisdiction for this very reason. The court’s involvement demonstrates the level of abuse present in the scandal.

The decision also had immediate political ramifications. The evidence present in the tapes and the attempts to hide them revealed Nixon’s culpability in the Watergate break in and cover up and damaged his credibility enough to force his resignation.⁷⁰ In

⁶⁸ Richard Nixon, “Statement on Status of Evidence in Watergate Case: Prosecutor and Court The Precise Truth A Search Was Ordered Personal Diary File Materials Listed,” ProQuest Historical *New York Times* 13 November 1976, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/119770826/abstract/13604DD4A5766EE588D/69?acountid=14434> (accessed 10 April 2012).

⁶⁹ United States vs. Nixon, Supreme Court , 24 July 1974.

⁷⁰ Stanley Kutler, *The Wars of Watergate: The Last Crisis of Richard Nixon*, 443-460.

Watergate: Implications for Responsible Government the authors argue that the judiciary was damaged by the scandal but that the courts fulfilled their constitutional role by protecting individual liberties and forcing the President to follow the law.⁷¹ Leon Jaworski confirmed this analysis. He stated, “from Watergate we learned what generations before us have known; our Constitution works. And during Watergate years it was interpreted again so as to reaffirm that no one - absolutely no one - is above the law.”⁷² The courts helped to restore confidence in the institutions of government because the system of checks and balance worked to contain the power of the President.

The Congressional Impeachment Articles accused Nixon of:

Approving, condoning, acquiescing in, and counseling witnesses with respect to the giving of false or misleading statements to lawfully authorized investigative officers and employees of the United States and false or misleading testimony in duly instituted judicial and congressional proceedings⁷³

This organized campaign of dishonesty prompted another important reform, the amendments to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in 1974. FOIA was originally passed in 1966 and established the right to access government information unless it was covered by one of the nine exemptions, which included among others, national security, trade secrets, and personal information. This act was not effective until it was amended in

⁷¹ Frederick Mosher, *Watergate : implications for responsible government*, (Senate Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities , New York : Basic Books , 1974).

⁷² Leon Jaworski, *The Right and the Power: The Prosecution of Watergate* (New York: Reader’s Digest Press, 1976), 279.

⁷³ U.S. Congress, "Articles of Impeachment Adopted by the House of Representatives Committee on the Judiciary," 27 July 27 1974, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*.
<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=76082>, (accessed 2 October 2012).

the post-Watergate era because prior to these changes, government officials used administrative technicalities and fees to block most FOIA requests.⁷⁴

After it was changed in 1974, FOIA required all agencies to report to Congress annually about their compliance with the law and provided fee waivers for requests that were in the public interest. Congress put in place strict time limitations for complying with FOIA requests, allowed non-exempt portions of exempted documents to be released and allowed courts to defer the cost of litigation against the government in some cases. Congress followed up on these changes by passing the Sunshine in Government Act to open up many previously private government agency meetings to the public, keep records of many formerly unrecorded meetings, and release these transcripts to the public.⁷⁵

Another important post-Watergate reform was the passage of amendments to the Federal Elections Campaign Act (FECA) in 1974, 1976, and 1979. President Nixon signed the original law in 1971, but it contained a number of weaknesses and CREEP took advantage of these loopholes during the 1972 election.^{76 77} The Watergate investigations discovered numerous campaign finance violations; the most significant was the use of illegal funds to finance the break in itself. The prosecutors also found out that the Nixon campaign accepted millions in illegal contributions from corporations.

⁷⁴ Michael D. Freedman, *The Watergate Reforms: Ten Years Later*, 24-25.

⁷⁵ Michael D. Freedman, *The Watergate Reforms: Ten Years Later*, 24-25.

⁷⁶ Anthony Corrado et al. *The New Campaign Finance Sourcebook* (Washington, D.C.: Brooking Institute Press, 2005) 22.

⁷⁷ Michael D. Freedman, *The Watergate Reforms: Ten Years Later*, 16.

This raised serious questions about many of his administration's appointments and policies.⁷⁸

Archibald Cox in a *New York Times* Article in May of 1974 stated that large amounts of illegally raised corporate money enabled many of the crimes of the Nixon Administration.⁷⁹ The Ervin Committee's final report made similar allegations. The committee called for campaign finance reform to stop this from ever happening again. They advocated for the formation of a Federal Election Commission to monitor campaign finances, a limit of one hundred-dollar individual donation to federal campaigns, a rule requiring presidential campaigns to use a central bank to fund all campaign activities, and an overall limit on presidential campaign expenditures.⁸⁰

The public outrage caused by these revelations prompted Congress to amend FECA and to adopt some of the suggestions of the Ervin Committee. The new law limited individual contributions to one thousand dollars per candidate and five thousand dollars per cycle, created a bipartisan Federal Elections Commission (FEC) to enforce the law, established a public financing system for presidential elections, and limited total campaign spending and independent expenditures on behalf of individual candidates.

⁷⁸ United States Senate, "Final Report of the Senate Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities," 27 July 1974, http://www.maryferrell.org/mffweb/archive/getToc.do?docId=144965&relPageId=581&source=controls_D.jsp, (accessed 11 April 2012).

⁷⁹ Archibald Cox, "Ends: Watergate Reflections," 19 May 1974 ProQuest: Historical *New York Times*, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/120178540/abstract/136051A967B49269A/6?accountid=14434>, (accessed 11 April 2012).

⁸⁰ United States Senate, "Final Report of the Senate Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities," 27 July 1974, http://www.maryferrell.org/mffweb/archive/getToc.do?docId=144965&relPageId=581&source=controls_D.jsp, (accessed 11 April 2012) 563-578.

However in the *Buckley v. Valeo* decision, the Supreme Court declared limits on outside spending and candidate donations to their own campaigns to be unconstitutional.

Congress responded swiftly in 1976 with several new amendments. They placed new limitations on spending by corporations, trade associations, and labor unions through political actions committees (PAC's). In 1979 Congress again updated the law to increase the efficiency of the system of public reporting of campaign finances and the enforcement of the law.^{81 82}

The changes to FOIA and FECA as well as the passage of the Sunshine in Government Act gained widespread support from across the political spectrum. John Gardner in his book explaining the founding of Common Cause, called for a vast overhaul of campaign finance reform and for greater government transparency. He argued that the current system of election financing allowed corporations to buy politicians and eliminate the influence of the general public.⁸³ Common Cause's lobbyists played a significant role in the passage the amendments to Federal Elections Campaign Act, and by the late 1970's forty-six states had passed laws, sponsored by Common Cause, to reduce the influence of money in the political process and legislative secrecy.⁸⁴ A *Christian Science Monitor* article, written in 1980, praised Common Cause for these efforts. The author stated:

In terms of depth and breadth of its efforts- in Congress and state legislature- there probably has never has never been a reform movement so active and with such a record of accomplishment...the major impact of Common Cause, at both the federal and state levels has been on political ethics and election laws.

⁸¹ Michael D. Freedman, *The Watergate Reforms: Ten Years Later*, 16-17.

⁸² Anthony Corrado et al. *The New Campaign Finance Sourcebook*, 22-30.

⁸³ John Gardner, *In Common Cause*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1972).

⁸⁴ Michael Schudson, *Watergate in American Memory: How We Remember, Forget, and Construct the Past* (New York : Harper Collins Publishers, 1992) 158.

The article then noted that while some members of Congress did not appreciate these efforts, the American people benefited strongly from the political reforms that Common Cause helped to pass.⁸⁵

The reforms gained mixed support from President Ford but strong support from President Carter. In October of 1974 Ford signed the amendments to the 1971 Federal Elections Campaigns Act and quickly swore in the commissioners of the newly created Federal Elections Commission. However he expressed reservations about the constitutionality of the law.⁸⁶ In 1976, he again signed amendments to FECA, but he still only half-heartedly supported the law. He said in his signing statement:

I still have serious reservations about certain aspects of the present amendments. For one thing, the bill as presently written will require that the Commission take additional time to consider the effects which the present amendments will have on its previously issued opinions and regulations. A more fundamental concern is that these amendments jeopardize the independence of the Federal Election Commission by permitting either House of Congress to veto regulations, which the Commission, as an executive agency, issues. This provision not only circumvents the original intent of campaign reform but, in my opinion, violates the Constitution. I have therefore directed the Attorney General to challenge the constitutionality of this provision at the earliest possible opportunity.

He said that he decided to sign the bill because he thought it was what was best for the country and because the bill gained bipartisan support in Congress. He still intended to submit legislation to congress to address his concerns.⁸⁷ Ford vetoed the changes to the

⁸⁵ "Common Cause's Uncommon Role," *The Christian Science Monitor* 5 September 1980, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, https://secure.pqarchiver.com/csmonitor_historic/display_pdf.pdf?filename=/share3/pqimage/hnirs103v/201204091852/11043/1789/out.pdf, (accessed 9 April 2012).

⁸⁶ Andrew Downer Crain, *The Ford Presidency: A History*, 82-87.

⁸⁷ Gerald Ford, "Statement on Signing the Federal Election Campaign Act Amendments" of 1976," 11 May 1976, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=5974#axzz1rYjtgj1d> (accessed 9 April 2012).

Freedom of Information Act. He believed the level of access to information granted to the public by the law was too great. He said that the law could potentially damage the national security of the United States and that the release of FBI files would put many American's personal privacy at risk.⁸⁸

Carter never had to sign the Freedom of Information Act but he supported the law. He completely overhauled the way that the government classified information during his presidency and cited FOIA as an inspiration. He issued an executive order that reduced the number of agencies with classification authority and cut the number of years that documents could be classified. He also required that the government balance both secrecy and public interest when classifying information and created a task force to review compliance with his order.⁸⁹ Carter actually came to believe that FOIA was not strong enough. In 2006 in a *Washington Post* Editorial He stated:

The U.S. Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) turns 40 tomorrow, the day we celebrate our independence. But this anniversary will not be a day of celebration for the right to information in our country. Our government leaders have become increasingly obsessed with secrecy. Obstructionist policies and deficient practices have ensured that many important public documents and official actions remain hidden from our view.⁹⁰

He also supported efforts to pass campaign finance reform. When he signed the 1979 amendments to FECA, he praised the efforts of the congressional leadership to pass the

⁸⁸ Ford, "Veto of Freedom of Information Act Amendments," 17 October 1974, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=4477#axzz1rYjtgj1d>, (accessed 9 April 2012).

⁸⁹ Associated Press, "Carter To Ease Secrecy Rules," *Tri City Herald* 29 June 1978, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=j44uAAAIBAJ&sjid=34cFAAAAIBAJ&pg=4615,8346106&dq=president+carter+freedom+of+information+act&hl=en> (accessed 9 April 2012).

⁹⁰ Jimmy Carter, "We Need Fewer Secrets 2006," *The Washington Post* 3 July 2006, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/07/02/AR2006070200674.html>, (accessed 9 April 2012).

bill. He argued that the law would reduce general government corruption and balanced this goal with American's right to freedom of speech.⁹¹

The passage of amendments to the FECA and FOIA by Congress with bipartisan support demonstrates the urgent need the legislature felt to address the problems highlighted by Watergate. The concern in Congress over President Ford's veto of FOIA also supports this conclusion. Senator Edward Muskie, on the floor of the Senate after Congress sent FOIA amendments to President Ford, stated:

Mr. President, the Senate and House have sent to the President a bill to insure greater openness and public knowledge about the way our Government is run. The amendments to the Freedom of Information Act are a most significant product of this post-Watergate period because they will bring the people to the materials, facts and documents on which officials in Government base their decisions and policies.

He further states that Congress was concerned about the possibility that Ford would veto the legislation and even more worried that Ford would use a pocket veto, which Congress could not override.⁹² Eventually during the debate of the override of President Ford's veto of FOIA, Representative William Moorhead stated, "these amendments to the basic law assure a more open government" and would "provide to the President to prove to the disillusioned and still suspicious public that, in fact, he really meant what he said that day on nation wide television."⁹³ Congress wanted to change the law to allow citizens more

⁹¹ Jimmy Carter, "Federal Election Campaign Act Amendments of 1979 Statement on Signing H.R. 5010 Into Law," 8 *January 1980*, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=33005#axzz1os6m9rbq> (accessed 9 April 2012).

⁹² Edward Muskie, "Excerpt from the Congressional Record of October 17, 1974 on Freedom of Information Act," 17 October 1974, *The National Security Archive*, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/foia/ford.html>, (accessed 9 April 2012).

⁹³ William Moorhead, "Excerpt from Congressional Record of November 20, 1974 on Freedom of Information Act Amendments-Veto Message from President of the United States," 20 November 1974, *The National Security Archive*, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/foia/ford.html>, (accessed 10 April 2012).

access to information about the government and felt that the veto of the FOIA threatened the democratic process. Given the past abuse of the Nixon Administration this concern is hardly surprising. Congress was similarly invested in the passage of FECA. The *Associated Press* in 1976 reported that Congress considered extending public financing to congressional elections.⁹⁴ Around the same time, Common Cause also advocated for this change, and it launched a campaign to educate the public about this goal.⁹⁵ While this never actually happened, the fact that Congress seriously considered it demonstrates the degree to which Senators and Representatives wanted to pass real campaign finance reform and the power of the idea in the political landscape of the 1970's.

Freedman argued that FOIA and the Sunshine in Government Act represented a clear change in attitude from one of the most damaging aspects of the Nixon Administration: the fact that the president and his aides attempted to cover up wrongdoing for political gain. He stated that the new universal right to government records kept citizens informed and consequently gave them more power to support or oppose political actions.⁹⁶ Marshall further states that this reform was an important step to allow journalists to act as an important check on government secrecy in the post-Watergate era.⁹⁷ Freedman also stated that that the passage of FECA amendments were a reaction to, "the coincidence of contributions and government decisions" which, "encouraged

⁹⁴ The Associated Press, "Salons Call for Public Campaign Funding," *Eugene-Register Guard* 16 December 1976, <http://news.google.com/newspaper>, (accessed 9 April 2012).

⁹⁵ Rowland Evans and Robert Novack, "Buying Back Congress," *The News-Dispatch* 25 March 1977. <http://news.google.com/newspaper>, (accessed 9 April 2012).

⁹⁶ Michael D. Freedman, *The Watergate Reforms: Ten Years Later*, 25.

⁹⁷ Jon Marshall, *Watergate's Legacy and the Press: The Investigative Impulse* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011) 110-111.

public cynicism concerning government integrity.”⁹⁸ The reforms represented a serious change in the way elections were funded and the way the government released information. Political actors in the 1970’s clearly felt pressure to promote these kinds of changes because the public was still very concerned over the abuses that Watergate revealed.

Congress also passed the Ethics in Government Act in 1978 to curb corruption among federal officials. This law expanded the new Senate and House ethics rules that both houses had adopted in 1977 to other officials within the legislative branch and to the executive branch. It eliminated office slush funds, limited outside income from political activities, and imposed lobbying restrictions on former federal officials. It also required many officials to publically disclose their investments and income on an annual basis. The law also created the Government Office of Accountability to review conflicts of interest within the government and cost of government policies and a permanent office of special prosecutor to investigate cases of abuse of power.⁹⁹

Congressional investigations in the 1970’s uncovered further evidence of widespread government corruption. A Senate investigation of IRS practices concluded that in many cases the agency abused its power. They found that, “procedures and practices used in terminating the tax years vary nationally from district to district, and as a result tax laws and regulations are not applied equitably to all taxpayers” and that seizure of assets often occurred when there was little evidence that tax collection was in

⁹⁸ Michael D. Freedman, *The Watergate Reforms: Ten Years Later*, 16.

⁹⁹ Michael D. Freedman, *The Watergate Reforms: Ten Years Later*, 16-19.

jeopardy.¹⁰⁰ The IRS also often turned over information to the FBI and included a Special Services Staff to look into specific groups and individuals.¹⁰¹ Senate investigations conducted by the Ervin Commission also found that many American corporations raised illegal funds from foreign countries and donated them to the Nixon campaign.¹⁰² In response to these abuses Congress passed the Tax Reform Act to tighten ethics rules within and oversight of the IRS and the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, which banned American corporations from bribing foreign officials and encouraging corruption in other countries for profit.¹⁰³

Both President Carter and Common Cause supported these reforms. Carter declared in 1980 after he was accused of wanting to undo the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act that he, “remained deeply committed to the principles of the act” and was “steadfastly opposed to weakening the intent of the act.”¹⁰⁴ In 1977, Carter proposed ethics restrictions before Congress passed the Ethics in Government Act in 1978. He

¹⁰⁰ U.S. Senate. Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities. 6 July 1974, Volume 3: Internal Revenue Service, Exhibit 8: Letter to Donald C. Alexander, Commissioner of Internal Revenue Service. Assassination Archives and Research Center, http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/vol3/html/ChurchV3_0032a.htm, (accessed 2 April 2012) 59.

¹⁰¹ AARC Public Library Contents, “Volume 3: Internal Revenue Service,” http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/contents/church/contents_church_reports_vol3.htm, (accessed 10 April 2012).

¹⁰² United States Senate, “Final Report of the Senate Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities,” 27 July 1974, http://www.maryferrell.org/mffweb/archive/getToc.do?docId=144965&relPageId=581&source=controls_D.jsp, (accessed 11 April 2012).

¹⁰³ Michael D. Freedman, *The Watergate Reforms: Ten Years Later*, 31.

¹⁰⁴ The Associated Press, “Carter Supports Bribery Ban,” *Lakeland Ledger* 10 September 1980, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=3UVNAAAIAIAJ&sjid=KPsDAAAIAIAJ&pg=5270,3553545&dq=carter+foreign+corrupt+practices+act&hl=en>, (accessed 10 April 2012).

stated this was necessary to, “establish far-reaching safeguards against conflicts of interest and abuse of the public trust by government officials.”¹⁰⁵ Common Cause sued the 1972 Nixon campaign in court to reveal illegal corporate contributions. The *Associated Press* said that this effort eventually helped to convict nearly 55 corporations of campaign finance violations and revealed that US corporations bribed foreign countries to encourage the sale of their products. In 1975 Common Cause filed an ethics complaint against Representative Robert Sikes because of a conflict of interest between his business interests and his role as chairman of the congressional subcommittee in charge of military contracting. The investigation eventually cost Sikes his chairmanship and highlighted the need to codify the ethics restrictions Congress imposed on itself into law.¹⁰⁶ They soon did this with the Ethics in Government Act in 1978.¹⁰⁷

Congress created the GAO and the independent prosecutor in order to actively enforce the new ethics laws. The success of the special prosecutor in forcing Nixon’s resignation demonstrated the potential benefits of creating a permanent office. The Government Accountability Office quickly proved to be influential as well. For example it audited Common Cause and declared that since it did not support any specific candidate it qualified as a non-partisan group. This increased the organization’s

¹⁰⁵ Laura Foreman, “President Proposes Ethics Laws...,” *The New York Times* 4 May 1977, <http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F10B15F73B5D167493C6A9178ED85F438785F9>, (accessed 10 April 2012).

¹⁰⁶ The Associated Press, “Common Cause Has Exhibited Clout,” *The Spokesman Review* 13 March 1977, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=1ztOAAAIAIAJ&sjid=su0DAAAIAIAJ&pg=2777,5516461&dq=gao+campaign+finance+reforms+1970's&hl=en>, (accessed 10 April 2012).

¹⁰⁷ Michael D. Freedman, *The Watergate Reforms: Ten Years Later*, 31.

credibility to fight against government corruption.¹⁰⁸ Congress, through the GAO, was able to have a more effective and non-partisan role to examine and contain government abuse.

In 1973 Arthur Schlesinger wrote *The Imperial Presidency* and chronicled the development of the power of the president in the arena of foreign policy. He argued that the power of the president was expanding beyond its constitutional design and that this was a threat to American democracy. He stated that the “imperial presidency” originally was a foreign policy problem but by the time of the Nixon Administration that presidential influence over domestic policy was a serious concern as well. He said that Nixon epitomized the “imperial presidency” because he attempted to concentrate power in his hands and eliminate the ability of Congress, the courts, the public and the press to counter his actions.¹⁰⁹

Schlesinger’s concerns about the presidency were very accurate. The Articles of Impeachment against Nixon eventually stated:

He misused the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Secret Service, and other executive personnel, in violation or disregard of the constitutional rights of citizens, by directing or authorizing such agencies or personnel to conduct or continue electronic surveillance or other investigations for purposes unrelated to national security, the enforcement of laws, or any other lawful function of his office; he did direct, authorize, or permit the use of information obtained thereby for purposes unrelated to national security, the enforcement of laws, or any other lawful function of his office; and he did direct the concealment of certain records

¹⁰⁸ The Associated Press, “Common Cause Has Exhibited Clout,” *The Spokesman Review* 13 March 1977, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=1ztOAAAIBAJ&sjid=su0DAAAIBAJ&pg=2777,5516461&dq=gao+campaign+finance+reforms+1970's&hl=en>, (accessed 10 April 2012).

¹⁰⁹ Arthur Schlesinger, *The Imperial Presidency*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973).

made by the Federal Bureau of Investigation of electronic surveillance.¹¹⁰

These abuses prompted the creation of the United States Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities or the Church Committee.¹¹¹ The Church Committee Final Report contained extensive details on Nixon's abuse of the intelligence services and their illegal activities during the 1970's and the preceding decades. In the 1970's the FBI used warrantless wiretaps and surveillance techniques to monitor journalists, members of Congress and the government, and many other prominent civic and public leaders, even though, agents often had almost no evidence that any of the people they investigated had committed a criminal act. The Nixon Administration in particular used the FBI program, COINTELPRO, to monitor political opponents. The CIA engaged in domestic spying during Operation CHAOS despite the fact that the CIA was expressly forbidden by Congress from doing this. The CIA also aided in the assassination of several foreign leaders and intervened in the internal politics of other countries without proper authorization. Both organizations helped to execute and cover up the Watergate break in.¹¹²

The final report from the Church Committee stated that reform was essential. It argued:

¹¹⁰ U.S. Congress, "Articles of Impeachment Adopted by the House of Representatives Committee on the Judiciary," 27 July 1974, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*.

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=76082> (accessed 11 April 2012).

¹¹¹ Kathryn Olmsted, *Challenging the Secret Government: The Post-Watergate Investigations of the CIA and FBI*, 1-27.

¹¹² U.S. Senate. Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities. 6 July 1974, Volume 3: Internal Revenue Service, Exhibit 8: Letter to Donald C. Alexander, Commissioner of Internal Revenue Service. Assassination Archives and Research Center, http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/vol3/html/ChurchV3_0032a.htm, (accessed 2 April 2012).

The Committee has carefully inquired into the role of presidents and their advisors with respect to particular intelligence programs. On occasion, intelligence agencies concealed their programs from those in higher authority, more frequently it was senior officials themselves who, through pressure for results, created the climate in which abuses occurred. It is clear that greater executive control and accountability is necessary. The legislature has been remiss in exercising its control over the intelligence services.¹¹³

Congress eventually acted on these conclusions and changed the relationship between the President, Congress, and the intelligence services. These investigations resulted in the passage of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, which required the President to seek judicial approval before conducting electronic surveillance of American citizens or legal permanent residents within the United States. The act also established the Foreign Intelligence Court to oversee surveillance cases and provided civil remedy for citizens who were illegally wiretapped. Congress also established a permanent select committee on intelligence to oversee the actions of the intelligence services. President Reagan eventually signed Executive Order 12333, which banned the assassination of foreign leaders.¹¹⁴ These changes represented a serious challenge to the power of the president in the arena of national security. This demonstrated the degree to which Watergate and Vietnam affected the national psyche since traditionally the President had nearly unchecked power to direct foreign policy.

Collectively these reforms were one of the broadest changes to the way the government operated in the history of the United States. The case of the *United States v.*

¹¹³ U.S. Senate. Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities. 6 July 1974, Volume 3: Internal Revenue Service, Exhibit 8: Letter to Donald C. Alexander, Commissioner of Internal Revenue Service. Assassination Archives and Research Center, http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/church/reports/vol3/html/ChurchV3_0032a.htm, (accessed 2 April 2012) 11.

¹¹⁴ Michael D. Freedman, *The Watergate Reforms: Ten Years Later*, 27-30.

Nixon demonstrated that the constitutional system of checks and balances could contain the power of the president. The Freedom of Information Act helped public interest lobbies and journalists keep the government accountable. Since its passage, the amount of information about government actions and the ease of public access to this information expanded at a dramatic rate. However there is some more recent concern that this trend has been reversed since the September 11th attacks caused the Bush Administration to tighten restrictions to limit the media and the public's access to knowledge about the federal government.

The legacy of the other post-Watergate reforms is also complicated. The Ethics in Government Act contained a number of provisions designed to prevent government general corruption. These ethics rules remain in effect today and congress is still tightening them. Congress just recently passed a law that banned members of the legislative branch from trading stocks based on information they gain during their official duties. However there are still serious concerns among the general public about the level of influence special interests have in the United States government. The Office of the Independent Prosecutor was abolished in 1999 after it was criticized during the Clinton Administration. The elimination of this agency and the fact that Congress controls the funding of many regulatory agencies that enforce ethics laws, limits the power of these groups to oversee the executive and legislative branches.

The results of the Church Committee represent important checks to the power of the president in the arena of national security and foreign policy. They made it more difficult for the President to abuse the instruments of national security and dramatically increased Congressional oversight of the president. However the practical effect of these

reforms is limited. Presidents have still used the apparatus of national security for illegal acts. The most prominent example of this is Reagan's use of foreign policy apparatus to illegally fund the rebels in Nicaragua and sell arms to Iran in the Iran-Contra Affair. The recent actions and controversies of the Bush Administration during the "War on Terror", the passage of the PATRIOT Act, and the change in orientation of the national political dialogue since the September 11th terrorist attacks raise serious questions about the limitations on the President imposed by the results of the Church Committee.

A *Christian Science Monitor* editorial in 2002 stated that the September 11th terrorist attacks have had a significant effect on the presidential power in the arena of national security and foreign policy. The authors argued that:

In a more concrete sense, the shift is now visible in the greater empowerment of the nation's intelligence agencies. In recent weeks, the FBI has given its undercover agents new rules that allow them to conduct surveillance in public places, such as at mosques, even if there's no evidence of criminal activity. Since 9/11, there has been renewed talk about the assassination of foreign leaders or agents by intelligence operatives, something that has been an anathema for more than two decades.¹¹⁵

The subsequent challenges to the Bush Administration and the changes in rhetoric and policy under the Obama Administration do present a challenge to this view. However the precedent still exists and there is continuing controversy over the Obama Administration's terrorism and national security policies. There is little doubt that the public has abandoned much of the wisdom of the Church Committee and accepted the idea that the President can aggressively use the apparatus of national security to protect the United States.

¹¹⁵ Francine Kiefer, *Watergate reforms fade, 30 years later*, (Christian Science Monitor, 2002) <http://www.csmonitor.com/2002/0617/p01s01-ussc.html>.

The Federal Elections Campaign Act was expanded a number of times after the 1970's to further limit the influence of money in politics, most recently with the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002. The Federal Election Commission still provides a level of oversight not present prior to Watergate and contributions to individual campaigns are limited and a matter of public record. However the Supreme Court and a number of other courts have declared a number of these laws unconstitutional in several cases, most notably in the *Buckley v. Valeo* and *Citizens United* decisions. These decisions removed many of the funding limitations on independent expenditure groups that do not directly coordinate with campaigns. This allowed the influence of “soft money”, independent political groups, and large donors to increase dramatically. These groups are almost completely unregulated and despite the current campaign finance laws, the amount of money spent in all political campaigns in the United States continues to rise at a rapid rate. The prevailing view in the courts that campaign contributions are free speech limits the prospect that campaign finance laws will ever be truly as effective as they were designed to be.

The rise of Common Cause and later many new public interest lobbies and watchdog groups represented a powerful way to hold government accountable but this political advocacy only involved a small percentage of the American public. Consequently, political advocacy alone could not fully restore public confidence in government. The clear need for reform pushed the political forces in the 1970's to change the way government operated. However the mixed legacy of these reforms limited their ability to fully revive public trust in government. Additionally, since Watergate was tied specifically to negative perceptions of presidential power itself it was

ultimately up to the presidents who followed Nixon to renew the American's peoples trust in political leaders and the institutions of government.

Chapter 3: Presidential Image in the Post-Watergate Era

The focus on the actions of the president after Watergate eventually completely changed politics in the United States and the public's view of government. Before these changes and the Watergate Scandal, trust in government reached its highest point among the general public in the 1960's and there was a broad political consensus between Democrats and Republicans that emphasized an active government that intervened to solve the nation's economic and social problems.¹¹⁶¹¹⁷ From the 1930's until the 1960's the New Deal Coalition dominated the political scene and created a vast array of social programs that expanded the power of the federal government.¹¹⁸ All of the Democratic presidents during this era supported these programs, and many of them further expanded the role of the national government in the lives of everyday citizens, most notably the Johnson Administration during the Great Society.¹¹⁹ During this era the moderate eastern establishment dominated the Republican Party. They did not entirely embrace the New Deal programs but they did not seek to dismantle them. For example Wendell Willkie, Roosevelt's opponent in the 1940 presidential election, promised to slow the growth of New Deal Programs and run them more efficiently but he did support their existence. Eisenhower and Nixon took a similar position. The distrust associated with Watergate challenged the existence of this consensus and pushed the presidents after Nixon to

¹¹⁶ Nicholas Lemann, *The New American Consensus; Government of, by and For the Comfortable*. (New York Times Company: November 01, 1998).

¹¹⁷ Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, *Distrust, Discontent, Anger and Partisan Rancor: The People and Their Governmen*, April 18, 2010.

¹¹⁸ Richard Harris, "The Era of Big Government Lives," in *Polity* (Palgrave Macmillan Journals, 1997) 187.

¹¹⁹ Sar Levitan and Robert Taggart, "The Great Society Did Succeed ," in *The Academy of Political Science* (Political Science Quarterly, 91, no. 4, 1976-1977): 601-618.

attempt to revive the American people's confidence in government.¹²⁰ Ford and Carter both failed to do this. Reagan was able to address this challenge through anti-government rhetoric and an emphasis on reduction of government in every way possible. This message tapped into the decline in confidence caused by Watergate by rejecting the very idea that an active government was a positive thing.¹²¹

President Ford and President Carter

When Gerald Ford took office in August 1974 his greatest challenge was to heal the nation and he was very aware of this. In his address after he took office he stated:

The oath that I have taken is the same oath that was taken by George Washington and by every President under the Constitution. But I assume the Presidency under extraordinary circumstances never before experienced by Americans. This is an hour of history that troubles our minds and hurts our hearts.¹²²

He further stated that, "There is no way we can go forward except together and no way anybody can win except by serving the people's urgent needs. We cannot stand still or slip backwards. We must go forward now together."¹²³ Prior to his selection as Vice President in November of 1973, the public approved of the possibility of his elevation by a margin of 53 to 25 percent. Louis Harris stated the initial public reception to Ford was largely positive especially when contrasted with public views of the Nixon Administration and the previous Vice President Spiro Agnew, who resigned in the wake of a corruption scandal.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Richard Harris, "The Era of Big Government Lives."

¹²¹ Richard Harris, "The Era of Big Government Lives."

¹²² Gerald Ford, *Gerald R. Ford's Remarks on Taking the Oath of Office as President*, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Foundation, August 1974.

¹²³ Gerald Ford, *Gerald R. Ford's Remarks on Taking the Oath of Office as President*, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Foundation, August 1974.

¹²⁴ Louis Harris, "Majority of Americans Approve of Ford Nomination," 6 November 1973 Harris Survey in *Bangor Daily News*,

The core of his positive image was the view that Ford was dependable, honest, and average. The *Washington Post* labeled Ford, “the most normal, sane, down-to-earth individual to work in the Oval Office since Harry Truman left.”¹²⁵ Betty Ford, the new first lady, helped to reinforce this image by speaking candidly to the national press about *Roe v. Wade*, women’s rights, and her struggles with cancer. While her statements did provoke controversy, she was widely admired for her candor.¹²⁶ An article in the *Lakeland Ledger* found that even in 1977 after political struggles damaged Ford’s reputation, Betty Ford was the most admired woman in America. The same article quoted a respondent to their questionnaire stating that Mrs. Ford, “was not influenced by fear of a bad press when she talked...you have to admire a person with this candor. She’s a total person.”¹²⁷ President Ford also sought to improve his relationship with the national press. He hired Jerald R. terHorst as his press secretary. He had been a reporter for much of his life and re-established a close relationship between the press and the White House.¹²⁸ The public also wanted to believe that Ford was exactly as he seemed and were simply relieved that Nixon had resigned.¹²⁹ This new image was a clear attempt to break from the past and helped to restore faith in the integrity of the Presidency.

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=jp8zAAAIAIAJ&sjid=bTgHAAAIAIAJ&pg=2450,2098942&dq=ford+viewed+positively+in+aftermath+of+nixon+resignation&hl=en> (accessed 11 April 2012).

¹²⁵ John Robert Greene, *The Presidency of Gerald Ford*, (Lawrence , Kansas: University Press of Kansas , 1995) 32.

¹²⁶ John Robert Greene, *The Presidency of Gerald Ford*, 32-35.

¹²⁷ Lakeland Ledger, “Mrs. Ford Is Most Admired,” 13 January 1977, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=3EdNAAAIAIAJ&sjid=wPoDAAAIAIAJ&pg=7043,2839864&dq=betty+ford+admired+for+candor&hl=en> (accessed 11 April 2012).

¹²⁸ John Robert Greene, *The Presidency of Gerald Ford*, 32-35.

¹²⁹ John Robert Greene, *The Presidency of Gerald Ford*, 34.

However Ford's decision to unconditionally pardon Nixon for all the crimes of the Watergate Scandal in September of 1974 quickly ended his ability to restore confidence in the presidency. The reaction to this decision was overwhelmingly negative. Ford's approval rating dropped immediately from a high of near 70 percent to about 50 percent and he never regained his former popularity.¹³⁰ Democrats and the media were highly critical of the decision. A *New York Times* article at the time stated that Ford's pardon of Nixon was problematic because it left a feeling that justice had not been served and that American democracy was still threatened.¹³¹ Senator Ted Kennedy stated in 1976 that he believed the pardon was a horrible decision because it promoted the view of, "one system of justice for the average citizen and another system for the high and mighty."¹³² Ford stated that he issued the pardon to move the country forward and help to heal the divisions created by Watergate.¹³³ His public statement at the time confirms this view. In a public proclamation Ford stated that, "the tranquility to which this nation has been restored by the events of recent weeks could be irreparably lost by the prospects of bringing to trial a former President of the United States."¹³⁴ There was no evidence of any

¹³⁰ Andrew Downer Crain, *The Ford Presidency: A History*, 55-71.

¹³¹ The New York Times, "The Watergate Gap," 25 September 1974, *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York*, <http://search.proquest.com/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/120041920/abstract/13609194B7E6ACD1C6A/14?accountid=14434> (accessed 11 April 2012).

¹³² Carl Cannon, "Mary Jo Kopechne and Chappaquiddick: America's Selective Memory," 2010 *Huffington Post*, <http://www.politicsdaily.com/2009/08/26/mary-jo-kopechne-and-chappaquiddick-americas-selective-memory/>, (accessed 11 April 2012).

¹³³ Andrew Downer Crain, *The Ford Presidency: A History*, 66-68.

¹³⁴ Gerald R. Ford, "Proclamation 4311 – Granting Pardon to Richard Nixon," 8 September 1974, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=4696> (accessed 11 April 2012).

corruption involved in the pardon and in a twist of historical irony Senator Kennedy awarded Ford with the Profiles in Courage Award in 2001 for pardoning Nixon.¹³⁵

The Democrats capitalized on the pardon and Watergate and increased their majorities in Congress in the midterm elections in 1974. The media also continued to hammer Ford because of the pardon. The *New York Times* described the pardon as, “blatant favoritism and injustice” that “rocked the American people.”¹³⁶ The pardon irreparably damaged Ford’s presidency because he was constantly fighting off allegations that he pardoned Nixon in exchange for the presidency. The political fallout from the pardon reinforced the widespread belief that the government could not be trusted and left many people even more unsatisfied with the state of the country.

These negative feelings had a huge impact on the 1976 presidential election. Ford’s Democratic opponent, Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter, promised to embrace political reform and focused on his status as a Washington outsider, a reformer and as a man of deep religious faith.¹³⁷ Carter wanted people to see him as someone who would never again commit the abuses of the Watergate Era, which many people now believed to include the pardon of Richard Nixon. Jimmy Carter stated during the campaign, “I want to see us once again have a nation, that's as good and honest and decent and truthful, and competent, and compassionate, and as filled with love, as are the American people.” One of his campaign ads also highlighted this ideal and in it Carter stated, “I will never tell a

¹³⁵ Gerald Ford, *Profiles in Courage Award: Gerald Ford*, 2001, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Events-and-Awards/Profile-in-Courage-Award/Award-Recipients/Gerald-Ford-2001.aspx> (accessed March 5, 2012).

¹³⁶ New York Times, “Up to the Democrats,” 7 November 1974, ProQuest Historical News Papers: Historical New York Times, <http://search.proquest.com/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/120008562/1360914AD694C91A1B3/12?accountid=14434> (accessed 11 April 2012).

¹³⁷ Slocum-Schaffer, *America in the Seventies*, 52-54.

lie. I will never make a misleading statement. I will never betray the confidence any of you has in me.”¹³⁸ He even stated during his 1980 re-election campaign when most of the public did not think that he was an effective President that he wanted to be judged based on, “how well I’m able to restore confidence of the people in the government itself.”¹³⁹ Carter promised to restore efficiency to the federal government and implement a “government of the people” in the United States.¹⁴⁰

Carter referenced his religious background and Baptist upbringing throughout the entire campaign to reinforce his image as an honest and decent man.¹⁴¹ In the immediate aftermath of his election *United Press International* stated that the evangelic movement helped propel him to victory and that Carter’s own religious background was viewed as likely to have a major impact on his policy decisions.¹⁴² He also campaigned as a Washington-outsider. Lawrence Knutson of the *Associated Press* stated Carter won in 1970 at least in part because he was, “a Washington Outsider and a proponent of the

¹³⁸ PBS Massachussetts, *American Experience: Jimmy Carter*, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/bonus-video/presidents-lying-carter/> (accessed March 2, 2012).

¹³⁹ Times-Post News Service, “Economy Is Not Only Problem Facing Carter,” 7 December 1979 *The Weekend Herald*, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=KHVkAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=Pn4NAAAAIIBAJ&pg=1066,4480000&dq=carter+campaign+promises+to+restore+integrity&hl=en>, (accessed 11 April 2012).

¹⁴⁰ Dan Hahn, "The Rhetoric of Jimmy Carter 1976-1980," in *Presidential Studies Quarterly* (Blackwell Publishing, 14, no. 2, 1984).

¹⁴¹ John Dumbrell, *The Carter Presidency: A Re-Evaluation*, (New York : St. Martin's Press, 1995) 1-3.

¹⁴² United Press International, “Carter, Evangelical Emerge as Major Forces in U.S.,” 15 January 1977 *The Montreal Gazette*, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=l5wuAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=jqEFAAAAIAIBAJ&pg=2914,2878597&dq=carter+emphasizes+religious+background+in+1976&hl=en>, (accessed 11 April 2012).

politics of love.”¹⁴³ He frequently said that he had never worked in Washington, was only a state governor and had been trained as an engineer and not a lawyer. Hahn states that he reinforced this image by “carrying his own suitcase” and “sometimes staying in the homes of supporters rather than in hotels”¹⁴⁴ The message worked and Carter narrowly won the election with 51 percent of the popular vote. Carter refused to directly attack Ford’s pardon of Richard Nixon and praised Ford’s character. Ford made the election close by portraying himself as ideologically moderate and running a nearly mistake free campaign.¹⁴⁵¹⁴⁶ However Carter’s rhetoric projected the direct contrast to the abuses of Watergate that the public wanted and indirectly raised the issue of the pardon effectively. This message ultimately propelled him to victory.

James Naughton in the *New York Times* in November of 1976 stated that:

The Watergate scandal, which toppled one President and haunted the next, made the Republican record somewhat schizophrenic. Mr. Nixon absorbed power; Mr. Ford used it lightly. But six years of imperial Presidency and two of executive restraint worked in combination to alter the outlook, change the tone and, to some extent, restructure the shape of the executive branch.¹⁴⁷

This quote underscores the fact that Carter inherited a legacy shaped by the last two Presidents and that the public still demanded a shift in leadership and policy. Initially Carter rose to meet this challenge. He began his presidency with a nearly 70 percent

¹⁴³ Lawrence Knutson, “How Jimmy Carter Won,” 5 November 1976 The Associated Press in *Waycross Journal-Herald*, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=I-5ZAAAAIBAJ&sjid=vkoNAAAAIBAJ&pg=5238,526725&dq=carter+campaigns+as+washington+outsider&hl=en>, (accessed 11 April 2012).

¹⁴⁴ Dan Hahn, "The Rhetoric of Jimmy Carter 1976-1980," 267.

¹⁴⁵ Andrew Downer Crain, *The Ford Presidency: A History*, 278-280.

¹⁴⁶ Andrew Downer Crain, *The Ford Presidency: A History*, 270-280.

¹⁴⁷ James Naughton, "Carter to Inherit Executive Branch Shaped by G.O.P.: Carter Is to Inherit Executive Branch That Bears Stamp of G.O.P Reign," in *Proquest: Historical New York Times*. New York Times Company. November 29, 1976. <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/122902272/abstract/13560A989606C5AF2FA/5?accountid=14434> (accessed February 25, 2012).

approval rating and he reorganized the executive branch to make it more transparent.¹⁴⁸

Carter picked many outsiders from Georgia and scholars from the Brookings Institute to staff the White House and abandoned the Nixon mentality of a few powerful staffers controlling access to the President. Carter did not appoint a chief of staff and initially planned most of his decisions with a group of trusted advisors with little formal structure. Even after he did implement more structure in the White House itself, he never allowed his staff in the West Wing to take a strong role in policy development.¹⁴⁹

Carter also pursued attempts to change both the foreign and domestic policies of the United States to reflect his promise to restore honesty and integrity to government. In the arena of foreign affairs he did this by aggressively pursuing human rights and in domestic affairs he embraced the passage of Watergate political reforms. In 1977 Carter signed the *Convention on Human Rights* on behalf of the United States and said:

This blank place on the page has been here for a long time, and it's with a great deal of pleasure that I sign on behalf of the United States this Convention on Human Rights which will spell out in clear terms our own belief in the proper relationship between free human beings and governments chosen by them. I believe that no one nation can shape the attitudes of the world, and that's why it's so important for us to join in with our friends and neighbors in the south to pursue as a unified group this noble commitment and endeavor. And I think that it's accurate to say that among almost all the leaders of the 150 nations of the world this year, there is a preoccupation with and a concern about basic human rights.¹⁵⁰

He created the Bureau for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs in the State Department and attempted to change the orientation of the State Department to

¹⁴⁸ John Dumbrell, *The Carter Presidency: A Re-Evaluation*, 1-5.

¹⁴⁹ Slocum-Schaffer, *America in the Seventies*, 59-60.

¹⁵⁰ Jimmy Carter, "American Convention on Human Rights - Remarks on Signing the Convention," 7 June 1977 The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=7613&st=human+rights&st1=#axzz1rhIrDHgD>, (accessed 11 April 2012).

emphasize Human Rights as an important element of American foreign policy.¹⁵¹ Carter also issued a pardon to everyone who dodged the draft during the Vietnam War.¹⁵²

Ultimately Carter was unable to restore faith in the presidency because he was unable to govern or accomplish the overall change that he had promised. His most significant problem was that he appointed many people with few connections to the traditional political establishment to key positions within his Administration and consequently he was unable to forge a successful relationship with Congress. The disorganized White House staff and Carter's own obsession with details left the executive unable to articulate its priorities and pushed Congress to rein in the power of the President, even though his own party was in the majority in the both houses of the legislature.¹⁵³ Carter and Congress engaged in a series of political battles over every element of domestic policy including welfare reform, energy policies, and the economy. Eventually this constant battle took a toll on Carter's approval ratings and by 1978 America was in the grips an energy crisis that Carter could not solve. Carter's foreign policy was also a complete disaster. He had some early successes with a peace agreement between Israel and Egypt, the Panama Canal Treaties, and the advancement of human rights; however his inability to forge peace treaties with the Soviet Union and the Iranian Hostage Crisis confirmed that he was a weak leader and a failed president.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ John Dumbrell, *The Carter Presidency: A Re-Evaluation*, 179-183.

¹⁵² Slocum-Schaffer, *America in the Seventies*, 60.

¹⁵³ Times-Post News Service, "Economy Is Not Only Problem Facing Carter," 7 December 1979 *The Weekend Herald*, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=KHVkAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=Pn4NAAAAIIBAJ&pg=1066,4480000&dq=carter+campaign+promises+to+restore+integrity&hl=en>, (accessed 11 April 2012).

¹⁵⁴ Slocum-Schaffer, *America in the Seventies*, 65-83.

These failures made his ouster in 1980 both welcome and inevitable. Prior to the his defeat the *Times-Herald* stated that Ted Kennedy, Carter's leading opponent for the Democratic Nomination, and all Republican candidates accused Carter of, "abject failure of leadership on domestic and foreign issues."¹⁵⁵ In the aftermath of Watergate people no longer trusted the national government or the people in control of it. Ford's pardon of Nixon confirmed these fears and Carter won the 1976 presidential election based on a promise to restore honest and effective to governance to the United States. However his disastrous policies and weak leadership deepened American's concern that the national political system could not adequately address the countries problems. Ford and Carter's fiascos laid the groundwork for the success of Ronald Reagan. His message was a fresh new approach to deal with the emerging post-Watergate consensus about the role of government in the United States. He embraced the idea that an active government was bad and that the American people without government interference were best suited to solve their own problems.

Economic Performance in the 1970's

The main alternative explanation for the success of Reagan's anti-government rhetoric and the decline of confidence in government in the 1970's is the economic failures of Ford and Carter. When Gerald Ford took office in 1974 he faced a wide range of economic difficulties. The United States experienced double-digit inflation for the first time in decades and by the end of the Ford's first year in office unemployment rose to 7.2

¹⁵⁵ Times-Post News Service, "Economy Is Not Only Problem Facing Cater," 7 December 1979 *The Weekend Herald*, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=KHVkAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=Pn4NAAAAIIBAJ&pg=1066,4480000&dq=carter+campaign+promises+to+restore+integrity&hl=en>, (accessed 11 April 2012).

percent. Economic production and wages declined precipitously and eventually unemployment rose to a high of 9.2 percent unemployment.¹⁵⁶ Ford identified inflation as the nation's most significant economic problem and adopted a basically useless public relations campaign called "WIN" or whip inflation now to address the American people's concerns. He also adopted an incoherent economic policy. He first proposed a tax increase but by 1975 he reversed course and sought tax cuts, which Congress rejected. Ford continued to advocate for tax cuts and reductions in federal spending.¹⁵⁷

These attempts did not win Ford any praise or support. The conservative wing of the Republic Party led by Ronald Reagan criticized his inability to reduce the overall deficit and Democrats were angry because of the 9.2 percent unemployment rate and for his attempts to halt the increase of public service jobs.¹⁵⁸ George Will of *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* labeled Ford's economic policies in 1975 as, "an economic jellyfish...boneless but not harmless."¹⁵⁹ Ford's poor economic performance was an important factor in his loss in 1976. Initially the economy improved under Carter. The rate of inflation fell to 8 percent and unemployment fell to 5.8 percent. The budget deficit also decreased and overall economic output, capital investments and productivity

¹⁵⁶ John Sloan, "The Ford Presidency: A Conservative Approach to Economic Management," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 14, No. 4, (Fall 1984), 526-528.

¹⁵⁷ John Sloan, "Economic Policymaking in the Johnson and Ford Administrations," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 20 No. 1, (1990) 113-115.

¹⁵⁸ John Sloan, "Economic Policymaking in the Johnson and Ford Administrations," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 20 No. 1, (1990) 113-115.

¹⁵⁹ George Will, "Ford Economic Plan Is Like A Jellyfish," 6 January 1975 *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*,
<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=FvwjAAAIBAJ&sjid=92YEAAAIBAJ&pg=2838,34094&dq=ford+economic+failures&hl=en> (accessed 11 April 2012).

increased.¹⁶⁰ However Carter's economic program, like most of his policies, were a complete failure.¹⁶¹ The overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1979 and a number of other events caused OPEC countries to reduce the supply of oil on the world market. This caused a panic in the United States known as the "Second Oil Crisis." This energy crisis resulted in high gasoline prices and gas shortages. Carter was unable to get any solution through Congress and faced opposition from gas and oil companies who feared new regulations and taxes.

Carter eventually gave a major speech in an attempt to reassure the American people that he could solve the energy crisis.¹⁶² In this "malaise" speech President Carter stated:

Ten days ago I had planned to speak to you again about a very important subject - energy. For the fifth time I would have described the urgency of the problem and laid out a series of legislative recommendations to the Congress. But as I was preparing to speak, I began to ask myself the same question that I now know has been troubling many of you. Why have we not been able to get together as a nation to resolve our serious energy problem? It's clear that the true problems of our Nation are much deeper -- deeper than gasoline lines or energy shortages, deeper even than inflation or recession. And I realize more than ever that as president I need your help. So I decided to reach out and listen to the voices of America.¹⁶³

He said that he could not solve the present crisis because the American people faced a "crisis of confidence" that "strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national

¹⁶⁰ Ann May, "Fiscal Policy, Monetary Policy, and the Carter Presidency," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 23 No. 4, (1993).

¹⁶¹ Steven V. "How Carter can Win," 25 November 1979 *New York Times*, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times, <http://search.proquest.com/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/123920993/136097D299D57521C7F/20?accountid=14434> (accessed 11 April 2012).

¹⁶² Robert Strong, "Recapturing Leadership: The Carter Administration and the Crisis of Confidence," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 16 No. 4, (1986) 636-640.

¹⁶³ Jimmy Carter, "Crisis of Confidence," (15 July 1979) from *PBS: Jimmy Carter* (accessed April 2012).

will. We can see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation.”¹⁶⁴ This speech was one of the worst moves that Carter ever made. Colin Campbell in a 1979 *New York Times* editorial stated:

Maybe confidence is, finally, too grand for mere temporal oratory and conversation. Mr. Carter should therefore be careful even in his pollsters confide to him that listeners are responding positively to confidence. Who can say what a great word like that will really grow to mean? For there’s a mischief in it, as well as firmness and goodness, and it’s a big enough match even for a president.¹⁶⁵

Carter’s unfathomable attempt to shift the blame for his own failures onto the American people and his predictions of gloom and doom did not work. This rhetoric completely erased any chance he had to win the 1980 presidential election. A *New York Times* article prior to the election confirmed this view. It stated that Carter was completely unable to deal with the country’s economic decline and consequently that he almost certainly would not be re-elected.¹⁶⁶ This analysis proved to be correct and Reagan trounced Carter in 1980.

Reagan campaigned on a promise to adopt strong free-market economic policies and to cut the federal government across the board. He adopted these policies when he took office and argued that lower tax rates and less government intervention would promote economic growth. By 1984 the economy recovered and Reagan won second

¹⁶⁴ Jimmy Carter, “Crisis of Confidence,” (15 July 1979) from *PBS: Jimmy Carter* (accessed April 2012).

¹⁶⁵ Colin Campbell, *Editorial Notebook: Confidence*, *New York Times*, 21 July 1979, <http://ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/120769881?accountid=14434>, (accessed 7 April 2012).

¹⁶⁶ Steven V. "How Carter can Win," 25 November 1979 *New York Times*, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times, <http://search.proquest.com/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/123920993/136097D299D57521C7F/20?accountid=14434> (accessed 11 April 2012).

term based in part of this prosperity.¹⁶⁷ The failure of Ford and Carter to restore economic stability to the United States certainly did cause a decline in trust in government in the 1970's. Lawrence argues that Democratic dominance in the New Deal era was based on their political advantage over the Republican Party in terms of perceptions of which party was best able to maintain prosperity and the Democrat's ability to instill the belief among the public that an active government was the best way to accomplish this goal. He further states that this advantage was erased during the 1980's because Reagan changed the political calculus in the United States. He concluded that if Republicans could avoid a major economic crisis then the Democrats would have a hard time regaining their political advantage on economic issues.¹⁶⁸

However the economy alone cannot explain all of Reagan's success. The Republican Party had long advocated non-intervention in the economy, and Reagan broadened this message to challenge the very notion that active government was a good thing. Mark Peffley studied the theory of "traditional reward-punishment theory" of economic voting. This concept argued that voters blame the incumbent party for any economic difficulties and will vote against the president and his party during times of economic downturn. However Peffley found that voter's judgments about responsibility for economic downturns are more complex than this theory suggests. He concludes that

¹⁶⁷ Olivier Jean Blanchard, William Branson, David Currie, "Reaganomics," *Economic Policy* 2 No. 5, (October 1987).

¹⁶⁸ David Lawrence, "The Collapse of the Democratic Majority: Economics and Vote Choice since 1952," *The Western Political Quarterly*, 44, No. 4 (December 1991).

the American tradition of individualism further weakens the connection between voting choice and economic performance.¹⁶⁹

This research casts serious doubt on the ability of any economic crisis to have a lasting impact on the political system of the United States. Economic crises like the one that occurred during the 1970's have caused temporary declines in public confidence but no crisis by itself fundamentally changed the way that Americans think about the government. This makes it clear that Reagan's shift from a simple economic doctrine to an idea about the positive impact of reducing government in every way would not have been successful without Watergate. This further emphasizes the fact that Watergate challenged the fundamental political and public consensus of the New Deal Era and that Reagan eventually capitalized on this shift.

President Ronald Reagan

Reagan successfully captured the distrust of Watergate in a way that the two previous administrations failed to do. He did this by adopting a two-pronged message. The first element was a strong criticism of government and the failures of the 1960's and 1970's. The second element emphasized a positive view of the American people and a promise that a reduction in the level of government would restore confidence and prosperity to the United States. In his announcement of his presidential campaign in 1978, Reagan blamed the weak economy on increased government spending and high taxes. He also praised the American people and stated:

The crisis we face is not the result of any failure of the American spirit; it is failure of our leaders to establish rational goals and give our people something to order their lives by. If I am elected, I shall regard my election as proof that the

¹⁶⁹ Mark Peffley, "The Voter as Juror: Attributing Responsibility for Economic Conditions," *Political Behavior* 6, No. 3 (1984).

people of the United States have decided to set a new agenda and have recognized that the human spirit thrives best when goals are set and progress can be measured in their achievement.¹⁷⁰

This speech did not mention Carter by name but Reagan drew a clear contrast between his views on the proper role of the federal government and the Democrat's emphasis on an active government. He indirectly blamed the years of Democratic dominance for the problems that the United States faced by the end of the 1970's.

He continued to use similar rhetoric during the 1980 campaign but by the time of the Republican Convention, he focused his criticism on the Democrats. He stated:

The major issue of this campaign is the direct political, personal, and moral responsibility of Democratic Party leadership, in the White House and in the Congress, for this unprecedented calamity, which has befallen us. They tell us they've done the most that could humanly be done. They say that the United States has had its day in the sun, that our nation has passed its zenith. They expect you to tell your children that the American people no longer have the will to cope with their problems, that the future will be one of sacrifice and few opportunities.

He promised that the Republican Party would restore prosperity and confidence to America and praised the American people for their spirit and resolve. He argued that the role of federal government in the lives of ordinary citizens needed to change. He said:

Well my view of government places trust not in one person or one Party, but in those values that transcend persons and parties. The -- The trust is where it belongs -- in the people. The responsibility to live up to that trust is where it belongs, in their elected leaders. That kind of relationship, between the people and their elected leaders, is a special kind of compact.¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰ Ronald Reagan, "Announcement of 1980 Presidential Campaign," 13 November 1979, *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*, <http://www.4president.org/speeches/reagan1980announcement.htm> (accessed 17 April 2012).

¹⁷¹ Ronald Reagan, "1980 Republican National Convention Acceptance Address," 17 July 1980, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/ronaldreagan1980rnc.htm> (accessed 17 April 2012).

This speech tied his approach to the promise of renewal and the Democrats approach to the failures of the 1960's and 1970's. Watergate was a fundamental part of this shift away from the New Deal view of government. His political masterstroke was the fact that he put Watergate and distrust in government into a wider context and thus avoided the immediate aftermath of Watergate that led to Democratic gains four years earlier. He argued that the American people should be trusted to solve social problems and that the government should empower them to do this by getting out of the way. The failures of government in the aftermath of Watergate during the 1970's made this a powerful argument that many Americans eagerly accepted. Reagan's rhetoric propelled him to a landslide victory in the Electoral College and he defeated Carter by nearly 10 percentage points in the popular vote. The 1980 presidential election was a realigning election because it began Republican's ascension to power and the ended years of Democratic dominance on the national stage.¹⁷²

Reagan also adopted a similar message during his presidency, however, he soon began to argue that his anti-government policies restored American power and prosperity. He stated in his first inaugural address:

In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem. From time to time we've been tempted to believe that society has become too complex to be managed by self-rule, that government by an elite group is superior to government for, by, and of the people. Well, if no one among us is capable of governing himself, then who among us has the capacity to govern someone else? All of us together, in and out of government, must bear the burden.¹⁷³

¹⁷² Slocum-Schaffer, *America in the Seventies*, 85-87.

¹⁷³ Ronald Reagan, First Inaugural Address, 20 January 1981 from Yale Law School: The Avalon Project, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/reagan1.asp (accessed 9 April 2012).

Reagan followed through on these ideas and adopted a radical new approach to government intervention that fundamentally changed the Keynesian consensus. These policies eventually came to be called “Reaganomics.” Reagan convinced Congress to pass two large tax cuts, reductions in domestic spending and government regulation, and to adopt a program of devolution that gave money and authority to states to administer many federal programs. The new Chairman of the Federal Reserve Paul Volcker, who Reagan appointed, also adopted a conservative approach to government intervention in the economy and decreased the money supply in order to combat inflation.¹⁷⁴ Reagan tied these new economic policies to renewed prosperity. He stated in 1981:

There have been some bright spots in our economic performance these past few months. Inflation has fallen, and pressures are easing on both food and fuel prices. More than a million more Americans are now at work than a year ago, and recently there has even been a small crack in interest rates.¹⁷⁵

Despite his positive assessment of the economy, from 1981 until 1982 the economy underwent a serious recession. Reagan’s tax cuts as well as increased defense spending exploded the federal deficit and inflation, and unemployment remained high. Luckily for Reagan, the economy rebounded by 1984 and remained strong throughout much of the rest of his presidency.¹⁷⁶ This recovery and subsequent prosperity validated Reagan’s anti-government message and boosted his popularity.

¹⁷⁴ Iwan Morgan, “Reaganomics and its Legacy,” *Ronald Reagan in the 1980’s: Perceptions, Policies and Legacies*, ed. Cheryl Hudson and Gareth Davies (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2008), 101-118.

¹⁷⁵ Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Nation on the Program for Economic Recovery,” 24 September 1981, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1981/92481d.htm> (accessed 18 April 2012).

¹⁷⁶ Iwan Morgan, “Reaganomics and its Legacy,” *Ronald Reagan in the 1980’s: Perceptions, Policies and Legacies*, ed. Cheryl Hudson and Gareth Davies (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2008), 101-118.

Reagan also advocated a change in the foreign policy of the United States. He argued that the United States needed to adopt a more aggressive stance to defeat communism and the Soviet Union. He stated that in order to do this and restore American power, the US needed to increase military spending. Reagan's first term was marked by a growing arms race between the US and the USSR, but during his second term he forged a number of historic negotiations with the Soviet Union, and the relationship between the two countries improved dramatically by the end of the 1980's. Reagan successfully argued that his policies restored the strength of the United States abroad, and he blamed the Democrats for a long-term decline in American prestige that began with Vietnam.¹⁷⁷ Eventually the fall of the Soviet Union and the status of the United States in the 1990's as the world only superpower confirmed the public's view that Reagan's foreign policy was a success.

In 2004 the *New York Times* evaluated Ronald Reagan's legacy and stated:

Ronald Wilson Reagan, a former film star who became America's 40th president, was the oldest to enter the White House but radiated a youthful optimism rooted in the traditional virtues of a bygone era. To a nation battered by Vietnam, damaged by Watergate and humiliated by the taking of hostages in Iran, Ronald Reagan held out the promise of a return to greatness, the promise that America would "stand tall" again. He managed to project the optimism of Franklin D. Roosevelt, the faith in small-town America of Dwight D. Eisenhower and the vigor of John F. Kennedy. In his first term he restored much of America's faith in itself and in the presidency, and he rode into his second term on the crest of a wave of popularity.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ Jack Matlock, "Ronald Reagan and the End of the Cold War," Ronald Reagan in the 1980's: Perceptions, Policies and Legacies, ed. Cheryl Hudson and Gareth Davies (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008), 57-79.

¹⁷⁸ The New York Times, "RONALD REAGAN DIES AT 93; FOSTERED COLD-WAR MIGHT AND CURBS ON GOVERNMENT," 6 June 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/06/06/us/ronald-reagan-dies-at-93-fostered-cold-war-might-and-curbs-on-government.html?pagewanted=15> (accessed 18 April 2012).

This assessment of his appeal was correct. During his 1984 presidential election, Reagan campaigned mainly on the idea that his policies restored prosperity and prestige to the United States. In his 1984 announcement of his re-election campaign, he emphasized his domestic and foreign policy successes and his bond with the American people.¹⁷⁹

Reagan's famous "Morning in America" campaign ad captured this message and stated:

It's morning again in America. Today more men and women will go to work than ever before in our country's history. With interest rates at about half the record highs of 1980, nearly 2,000 families today will buy new homes, more than at any time in the past four years. This afternoon 6,500 young men and women will be married, and with inflation at less than half of what it was just four years ago, they can look forward with confidence to the future. It's morning again in America, and under the leadership of President Reagan, our country is prouder and stronger and better. Why would we ever want to return to where we were less than four short years ago?¹⁸⁰

The press and public reaction to this advertisement and Reagan's overall theme was positive. The *New York Times* stated that Reagan ran an almost perfect campaign and that the election was a continuation of the realignment that began in 1980. Reagan led the Republicans to victories in Congress. They retook control of the Senate and avoided losses in the House. Reagan himself won a landslide victory in the Electoral College and the popular vote and handed Walter Mondale, the Democratic nominee and the Vice President under Carter, a staggering defeat.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation Announcing the Reagan-Bush Candidacies for Reelection," 29 January 1984, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1984/12984a.htm> (accessed 18 April 2012).

¹⁸⁰ "Morning in America," 1984, *Times Magazine: Top Ten Campaign Ads*, http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1842516_1842514_1842575,00.html (accessed 18 April 2012).

¹⁸¹ Howell Raines, "Mandate Claimed," 7 November 1984, *New York Times* (<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/122485020/136296463E07BA71970/18?accountid=14434> (accessed 4 March 2012)).

Reagan was the first president to win re-election since the Watergate scandal and his ability to maintain high approval ratings despite various scandals earned him the nickname the “Teflon President.”¹⁸² In his 1985 inaugural address, Reagan capitalized on his past political successes and promised continued renewal through government reduction. He stated:

By 1980 we knew it was time to renew our faith, to strive with all our strength toward the ultimate in individual freedom, consistent with an orderly society. We believed then and now: There are no limits to growth and human progress when men and women are free to follow their dreams. And we were right to believe that. Tax rates have been reduced, inflation cut dramatically, and more people are employed than ever before in our history. We are creating a nation once again vibrant, robust, and alive. But there are many mountains yet to climb. We will not rest until every American enjoys the fullness of freedom, dignity, and opportunity as our birthright. It is our birthright as citizens of this great Republic.¹⁸³

However his popularity did not last all the way through his second term. The Iran-Contra Scandal, in which Reagan Administration officials illegally sold weapons to Iran and supplied aid to Nicaraguan rebels after Congress explicitly banned these actions, dramatically lowered his approval ratings to 47 percent from a high of nearly 60 percent. Reagan’s approval remained low throughout 1987 but rebounded by the end of his presidency to 57 percent. Reagan’s legacy was also not permanently damaged by the scandal. Public perceptions of Reagan since the end of his presidency have improved so

¹⁸² Evan Thomas, Christopher Ogden, and Sam Allis, “Tackling the Teflon President,” Times Magazine 18 June 1984, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,951169,00.html> (accessed 3 March 2012)>

¹⁸³ Ronald Reagan, “Inaugural Address,” 21 January 1985, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1985/12185a.htm>, (accessed 18 April 2012).

dramatically that by the end of the 1990's, over 70 percent of Americans held a positive view of both Reagan and his performance in office.¹⁸⁴

This success raises two important questions. First, how did Reagan capitalize on the distrust in government created by Watergate and the other events of the 1960's and 1970's after two previous administrations failed to do so? Second, how did he create a lasting and overwhelmingly positive impression among the American people even though he faced a serious political scandal near the end of his presidency? Bothmer argues that Reagan used the distrust from Vietnam and Watergate to shift America from a liberal to conservative country based on a promise to renew America and by attacking the excesses of government during the Great Society in the 1960's.¹⁸⁵ The racial tensions that he played on in the South played into this dynamic as well. This argument does have a lot of merit, but it ignores the failure of the Carter and Ford Administrations and the political reforms in the 1970's to address the loss of confidence in government and the way that Reagan's message capitalized on this decline.

Watergate cemented the impression that government leaders and institutions were dishonest and ineffective. These twin perceptions grew from Nixon's personal involvement in Watergate and the widespread government failures that the subsequent investigations revealed. The events of the 1960's, including Vietnam and the civil rights movement, as well as the historical distrust in government, reinforced these strongly negative views of the political system. Ford's pardon of Nixon and his mishandling of the

¹⁸⁴ Frank Newport, Jeffrey M. Jones, and Lydia Saad, "Ronald Reagan From the People's Perspective: A Gallup Poll Review," 7 June 2004, Gallup Poll, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/11887/ronald-reagan-from-peoples-perspective-gallup-poll-review.aspx> (accessed 18 April 2012).

¹⁸⁵ Bernard Von Bothmer, *Framing the Sixties: The Use and Abuse of a Decade from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010).

economy and Carter's complete failure in many aspects of domestic and foreign policy and his extremely gloomy rhetoric did nothing to alter these views of the federal government. Ford and Carter's missteps and the events of the 1960's and 1970's overshadowed the efforts of Congress and advocacy groups like Common Cause to restore public trust by changing the way the government operated.

Reagan's message in the 1980's addressed the negative impression of both government leaders and institutions. This allowed him to succeed where the political actors of the 1970's failed. Reagan constantly praised the American people as decent and capable. This rhetoric and his constantly optimistic tone allowed him to restore faith in presidential leadership by emphasizing that he was enabling the people to make decisions without government interference. This was a smart move, because the public believed that government was the main cause of the nation's most serious problems in the 1970's. Reagan addressed the distrust in government institutions by promising to renew American prosperity through a reduction in the level of government. He followed through on these promises during his presidency. Even though there is a great deal of evidence that Reagan's policies were not solely responsible for the return to prosperity and power in the 1980's and 1990's, the public gave Reagan and his policies most of the credit for these positive changes. This success would later contribute to Reagan's growing myth and influence in American politics after the end of his presidency.

Schudson attempted to understand why the Iran-Contra Scandal did not permanently damage Reagan's legacy. He states that in order to ensure that Iran-Contra did not become another Watergate, Reagan quickly fired the aides involved in the scandal

and reported the scandal to the public before the press did.¹⁸⁶ David Lanoue argues that Reagan was able to regain popularity after the Iran-Contra Scandal because of his high prior approval ratings and the eventual conclusion that he was not personally involved in the scandal.¹⁸⁷ Reagan's address to the nation on Iran-Contra confirms much of this analysis. He gave specific details about the actions and people involved in the scandal and then assumed full responsibility for the scandal. However he also denied that he knew what his aides were doing and emphasized his previous record of domestic and foreign policy achievements and personal connection to the American people. He also argued that while his aides did break the law that he still believed that aiding the rebels in Nicaragua was the right thing to do.¹⁸⁸ Reagan's approach to the Iran-Contra Scandal was influenced by Nixon's cover-up during Watergate. He learned from the disaster and took the opposite approach. This paid off, and the public responded to his candor. He was able to use confidence he built up through his policy successes to avoid the perception that he was personally responsible for the abuse of power. The scandal did temporarily damage his approval ratings, but the political fallout from the scandal was far more limited than it could have been, especially given the failures of the previous three administrations and the distrust present in the post-Watergate environment. This success demonstrates the power of Reagan's message and represented his ultimate triumph over the challenge of distrust presented by Watergate.

¹⁸⁶ Michael Schudson, *Watergate in American Memory: How We Remember, Forget, and Reconstruct the Past*, 164-182.

¹⁸⁷ David Lanoue, "The 'Teflon Factor': Ronald Reagan & Comparative Presidential Popularity," *Polity* (Palgrave Macmillan Journals: Spring 1989) 481-501.

¹⁸⁸ Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy and Administration Goals," 12 August 1987, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=34693> (accessed 18 April 2012).

The success of Reagan's message and the change in public perceptions about government would not have been possible without Watergate and many other events of the 1960's and 1970's. Watergate challenged the idea that political leaders and the government could solve national problems. It presented the Carter and Ford with opportunities to restore confidence and later reinforced the negative perceptions of their missteps. Reagan's message built on these failures and changed the American political system but Watergate created the environment that enabled him to do all of this.

The Myth of Ronald Reagan

Reagan's message resonated powerfully with the public and made him the most influential politician of the last few decades. It also reshaped the political landscape of the United States. However the positive view of Reagan's influence has grown too strong and overshadowed the reality of his accomplishments and role in the changes in America in the 1980's and 1990's. Jules Tygiel argues that Reagan's legacy was a resurgent Republican Party and conservative movement. She states that George Bush Sr. won in 1988 by embracing Reagan's legacy and running against liberalism. She also states that Reagan's success allowed the Republican Party to end dominance of the Democratic Party in Congress and that the 1994 Republican Revolution led by Newt Gingrich epitomized this shift. She also states that Reagan reinvigorated the conservative movement in the judicial branch and created a more conservative generation of American citizens. Reagan also formed a new conservative coalition composed of Southern

conservatives, the newly powerful religious right and social conservatives, and economic and libertarian conservatives.¹⁸⁹

George Bush Sr.'s own statements confirm Reagan's important role in renewing the Republican Party. In his inaugural address in 1989, Bush Sr. began by paying homage to Reagan and stated, "There is a man here who has earned a lasting place in our hearts and in our history. President Reagan, on behalf of our nation, I thank you for the wonderful things that you have done for America." He then promised to continue Reagan's policies and emphasized that this approach restored peace and prosperity to the United States.¹⁹⁰ Bush eventually lost the 1992 election to Bill Clinton because of an economic downturn, conservative anger over his tax increases, and the historic third party performance of Ross Perot that siphoned off some of his support. Clinton only won 43 percent of the popular vote and campaigned as a "New Democrat" who emphasized fiscal responsibility, free trade, economic and welfare reform. These stances were far closer to Reagan's policies than to the ideas of the Democrats during the New Deal Era.¹⁹¹ This election demonstrated the enduring power of Reagan's legacy and the way that American politics shifted away from a belief in the positive role of government. Bush was damaged in part by his defiance of the Reagan mantra against new taxes and Clinton won by invoking principles similar to Reagan.

¹⁸⁹ Jules Tygiel, *Ronald Reagan and the Triumph of American Conservatism*, (New York: Pearson Education Incorporated, 2006) 235-255.

¹⁹⁰ George Bush, "Inaugural Address," 20 January 1989, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=16610#axzz1sMMsL6yO> (accessed 18 April 2012).

¹⁹¹ Jules Tygiel, *Ronald Reagan and the Triumph of American Conservatism*, (New York: Pearson Education Incorporated, 2006) 235-255.

This set-back to the Republican Party was only temporary. Newt Gingrich and Bob Dole led the Republican Party to reclaim a majority in both the House of Representatives and the Senate in 1994. The Republicans remained the majority party in both houses of congress for 12 years, until the 2006 election. This status was only temporarily interrupted for a two-year period during which the Senate was evenly split. This was the longest period of Republican dominance in Congress in decades.¹⁹² The original promise that propelled the Republican Party to victory was known as the Contract with America. This pledge capitalized on the Reagan legacy and promised to restore fiscal responsibility to the United States by giving the President the power of a line-item veto and the passage of a balanced budget and tax limitation amendment. It also promised a reduction in government spending and lower taxes across the board.¹⁹³ Nancy Reagan tied this victory of to Reagan's legacy. She stated that Newt Gingrich and her husband:

believed that government should simply get out of the way. Ronnie and Barry fought for those principles, which, today, have been overwhelmingly embraced. So they must have done something right. Just take a look at the extraordinary men and women who make up the 104th Congress and of course its distinguished speaker, Newt Gingrich. The dramatic movement of 1995 is an outgrowth of a much earlier crusade that goes back half a century. Barry Goldwater handed the torch to Ronnie, and, in turn, Ronnie turned that torch over to Newt and the Republican members of Congress to keep that dream alive.¹⁹⁴

This victory demonstrated the enduring power of Reagan's message and the role that it played in returning the Republican Party to a position of strength that it lost for decades.

¹⁹² L. David Roper, "Composition of Congress Since 1867," <http://arts.bev.net/roperldavid/politics/congress.htm>, (accessed 18 April 2012).

¹⁹³ "Republican Contract With American," 1994, <http://www.house.gov/house/Contract/CONTRACT.html> (accessed 18 April 2012).

¹⁹⁴ Nancy Reagan, "Speech at Goldwater Institute Dinner," 1995, *Real Clear Politics*, http://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2012/01/26/nancy_reagan_in_1995_ronnie_turne_d_that_torch_over_to_newt.html (accessed 18 April 2012).

The Republican's dominance during the 1990's was not complete. Bill Clinton did win re-election in 1996 in a landslide in the Electoral College and by a significant margin in the popular vote. However, he continued to invoke rhetoric and promote policies that built on the Reagan legacy. Bill Clinton famously declared in his 1996 State of the Union that, "the era of big government is over."¹⁹⁵ Clinton's policies emphasized controlling government spending. He signed a landmark welfare reform bill and successfully balanced the federal budget. Clinton eventually left office with record high approval ratings. Gil Troy argued that Clinton's success was based on Reagan's legacy. He stated that by the 1990's, America had been "Reaganized" politically and that Americans had largely rejected the idea that more government was progress.¹⁹⁶ Lawrence supports this conservative shift in the United States. He demonstrates that the Republicans under Ronald Reagan were able to end Democratic dominance by the 1990's by changing the political dialogue in American and instilling a more conservative view of government among the public.¹⁹⁷

The presidency of George W. Bush, the most recent Republican president, was largely concerned with foreign policy and national security matters due to the September 11th terrorist attacks and the subsequent War on Terror. Bush's initial popularity from these attacks and the Republican's advantage over Democrats on foreign policy issues helped the Republican Party to maintain its dominance in Congress during the early years of the 2000's. Bush only narrowly won the 2000 Presidential election in the Electoral

¹⁹⁵ Bill Clinton, "1996 State of the Union Address," 23 January 1996 The White House, <http://clinton4.nara.gov/WH/New/other/sotu.html>, (accessed 11 April 2012).

¹⁹⁶ Gil Troy, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980's*, (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2005), 327-335.

¹⁹⁷ David Lawrence, "The Collapse of the Democratic Majority: Economics and Vote Choice since 1952," *The Western Political Quarterly*, 44, No. 4 (December 1991).

College and did not win the popular vote. However, his domestic agenda and his campaign theme of compassionate conservatism, borrowed much from Reagan's policies and message. He reined in domestic spending and passed a series of across the board tax cuts. He also emphasized Reagan's optimistic tone about the American people and the future. Bush liked Reagan also emphasized the need to maintain American power through increased military spending and an aggressive foreign policy.¹⁹⁸¹⁹⁹ During his eulogy at Reagan's funeral, Bush praised Reagan and his agenda:

He came to office with great hopes for America, and more than hopes -- like the President he had revered and once saw in person, Franklin Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan matched an optimistic temperament with bold, persistent action. President Reagan was optimistic about the great promise of economic reform, and he acted to restore the reward and spirit of enterprise. He was optimistic that a strong America could advance the peace, and he acted to build the strength that mission required. He was optimistic that liberty would thrive wherever it was planted, and he acted to defend liberty wherever it was threatened.²⁰⁰

Reagan's funeral attracted more media and public attention than any other in recent memory, and demonstrated that he remained the dominant figure of the 1990's and 2000's even after his death.

Will Bunch analyzed Reagan's influence in the aftermath of his presidency. He argues that Reagan was the most influential figure in American politics in the decades after his presidency and reshaped both the Republican and Democratic Parties. However he also argues that his legacy has been exaggerated by political and media figures and

¹⁹⁸ Iwan Morgan, "Reaganomics and its Legacy," Ronald Reagan in the 1980's: Perceptions, Policies and Legacies, ed. Cheryl Hudson and Gareth Davies (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008), 101-118.

¹⁹⁹ Jules Tygiel, *Ronald Reagan and the Triumph of American Conservatism*, (New York: Pearson Education Incorporated, 2006) 235-255.

²⁰⁰ George W. Bush, "Eulogy for Ronald Reagan," 11 June 2004, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbreaganeulogy.htm> (accessed 18 April 2012).

that this myth contributed to Reagan's later popularity. He praises Reagan's political talents, leadership, optimism and vision but states that in contemporary American politics Ronald Reagan is more of a myth than a reality. He argues Reagan's policies were not nearly as positive for the country as people now believe. This analysis demonstrates the power of Reagan's myth.²⁰¹ Bunch later states, "much of what today's voters think they know about the 40th president is more myth than reality, misconceptions resulting from the passage of time or from calculated attempts to rebuild or remake Reagan's legacy."

²⁰²

Andrew Sullivan, in a *Reuters* article about the 2012 Republican primaries, argued that the most important endorsement in the election would be Ronald Reagan if he were still alive. He said that all of the current Republic presidential candidates invoked Reagan's legacy for political gain because Reagan's election

proved that conservative candidates could appeal to a broad spectrum of voters. The economy boomed as he cut taxes and deregulated, and the Soviet Union crumbled as he pursued an often-confrontational foreign policy. His approval rating was nearly as high when he stepped down as when he took the oath of office.²⁰³

Rick Santorum and Newt Gingrich regularly praise Ronald Reagan on the campaign trail, and Nate Silver of the *New York Times* said that Republican candidates as of January

²⁰¹ Will Bunch, *Tear Down This Myth: How the Reagan Legacy Has Distorted Our Politics and Haunts Our Future*, (New York: Free Press, 2009).

²⁰² Will Bunch, "Five Myths About Ronald Reagan's Legacy," *Washington Post* 4 February 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/02/04/AR2011020403104.html> (accessed 4 April 2012).

²⁰³ Andrew Sullivan, "Most Coveted Endorsement in Presidential Race? Ronald Reagan," *Reuters* 4 April 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/04/04/us-usa-campaign-reagan-idUSBRE8331BZ20120404>, (accessed 4 April 2012).

2012 mentioned Reagan's name over 100 times in primary debates.²⁰⁴ Democrats also still attempt to use Reagan's legacy for political gain.²⁰⁵ President Obama recently said, "No matter what political disagreements you may have had with President Reagan — and I certainly had my share — there is no denying his leadership in the world, or his gift for communicating his vision for America." He then argued that Reagan would have agreed with his economic policies more than the ideas of the current Republic Congress.²⁰⁶ No other Republican President of the modern era inspires this level of devotion.

Stephen Ambrose, a popular Reagan biographer stated, "Reagan will be remembered as the president who reversed the decades-old flow of power to Washington." This quote was used by the Heritage foundation, a powerful conservative think tank, to promote a symposium about the supposedly positive effect that Ronald Reagan policies had on the America. It underscores the misguided view, consistently held by conservative scholars and politicians, that Ronald Reagan was individually responsible for the political shift from broad acceptance of an active government to the emphasis on an inactive government.²⁰⁷ Conservatives emphasize Reagan's legacy because of his enduring popularity and perceived successes.

²⁰⁴ Nate Silver, "Reagan Count: Gingrich 55, Romney 6," *The New York Times* 24 January 2012. <http://fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/24/reagan-count-gingrich-55-romney-6/>, (accessed 4 April 2012).

²⁰⁵ Will Bunch, "Five Myths About Ronald Reagan's Legacy," *Washington Post* 4 February 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/02/04/AR2011020403104.html> (accessed 4 April 2012).

²⁰⁶ Andrew Sullivan, "Most Coveted Endorsement in Presidential Race? Ronald Reagan," *Reuters* 4 April 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/04/04/us-usa-campaign-reagan-idUSBRE8331BZ20120404>, (accessed 4 April 2012).

²⁰⁷ Stephen Ambrose, "How Great was Ronald Reagan? Our 40th President's Place in History," *The Heritage Foundation*, <http://www.heritage.org/about/press/how-great-was-ronald-reagan-40th-president-place-in-history> (accessed 2 April 2012).

However some historians share this oversimplified view. Gil Troy explored the impact that Ronald Reagan had on the 1980's. He acknowledges the influence of social factors and broader historical trends on the transformation that occurred in the 1980's, but he still focused on Reagan as the main impetus for change. He argues that Reagan paved the way for the rise of Bill Clinton's successful third way politics and barely touches on the role of Watergate.²⁰⁸ Alford further argues that Reagan was successful because people found his ideology and personality attractive.²⁰⁹ This view of Reagan's legacy is not as incorrect as the view taken by strong conservatives, but it still relies too much on the great man theory of history. This theory of historical development argues that individual leaders are the primary factors that cause historical change.²¹⁰

Reagan successfully captured the distrust of government in a way that Carter and Ford failed to do. His political charisma, popularity, and communication skills definitely helped this process. His message shaped the decades after his presidency; however the fundamental change in American's view of government would not have been possible without Watergate and the events of the 1960's and 1970's. Republicans during and after the Reagan Era tied themselves to a powerful anti-government message, and it was successful because they linked restored prosperity and prestige in the 1980's and 1990's to reduction of the power of the federal government. This message finally broke the political consensus of the New Deal that allowed the Democratic Party to dominate politics for over forty years. However this change would not have been possible if the

²⁰⁸ Gil Troy, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980's*, 327-335.

²⁰⁹ C. Fred Alford, "Mastery and Retreat: Psychological Sources of the Appeal of Ronald Reagan," *Political Psychology* 9, No. 4 (Dec., 1988), 571-572.

²¹⁰ Edwin G. Boring, "Great Men and Scientific Progress," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 94 No. 4, (25 August 1950).

political reforms and political actors of the 1970's had successfully restored public confidence in the political system. They failed to do this because they focused on government as the way to solve problems and did not challenge the New Deal model's fundamental assumption that an active government could solve problems.

Watergate's shock already demonstrated to many people that the active government model was flawed, because it revealed vast government corruption and inadequacies. It showed that these failures were widespread and went far beyond the actions of the Nixon Administration. It was what caused many people to originally question the role of government in their everyday lives. The political and policy failures of the 1970's under Ford and Carter only reinforced this view. Reagan and the Republicans successfully adopted the post-Watergate view of government by stating explicitly that more government was bad, and that the American people alone should take primary responsibility to solve national problems. Reagan was the pioneer who first understood where the country was going, but he did not create the circumstances that began this shift. Consequently the historical myths that Reagan was responsible for all of the political changes in the 1980's and beyond and its increasing power in American politics is very troubling. Politicians across the political spectrum and scholars have embraced this view but it is fundamentally flawed. Watergate was the spark that started this change and gave Reagan's message much of its lasting impact. Reagan was a talented politician but his legacy needs to be properly understood by the general public.

Chapter 4: Politics of Distrust

Watergate was one of the most significant events in American political history. The Nixon Administration violated many government transparency and campaign finance laws and used the US intelligence apparatus and offices of the executive branch against political opponents. Many members of the Administration, including the president, then engaged in an extensive campaign to cover up these criminal acts. While this extensive abuse of power for self-interested political reasons did make Watergate unique, the historical background of the scandal increased its power immensely. Distrust in government has always been a powerful force in the United States and it strengthened the public reaction to the vast corruption involved in Watergate. Additionally, the intense social and political battles of the civil rights movement created distrust in government across the political spectrum. It undermined liberal confidence that the government was fair and just and to conservatives, it represented an unprecedented federal attack on the traditional values of the United States. This perception eventually propelled southern conservatives to the Republican Party and provided an audience that was already receptive to Reagan's anti-government message.

The Vietnam War also shaped the public response to the Watergate Scandal. It drained the political capital of the Nixon Administration and left it largely unable to counter the negative perceptions that eventually resulted from Watergate. Vietnam also led the Nixon Administration to form the "Plumbers" to stop leaks to the press about the war and this created many patterns that later characterized the Watergate cover-up. In addition, the release of the Pentagon Papers, the Nixon Administration's attempt to prevent their release, and Nixon's secret bombing campaign in Cambodia inevitably

strengthened the perception that the president could not be trusted. The political divisions caused by both Vietnam and the civil rights movement left the public very open to any suggestion that the government was not acting in the public's best interest. Watergate eventually confirmed all of these negative feelings about government. The media coverage of the scandal cemented the consensus that the national government was ineffective.

A *New York Times* editorial stated that Watergate was “the most extra-ordinary reversal of political fortunes in living memory.” It further stated that Congress quickly and successfully limited the president's authority and that the institution of the presidency was seriously damaged by the scandal.²¹¹ This analysis highlighted the need and desire for a change in the way government operated in order to prevent a recurrence of Watergate. The initial response to this serious deficit of trust was the passage of many political reforms and the rise of independent watchdog groups and lobbies like Common Cause. These responses left a mixed legacy. The rise of citizen lobbies created a level of independent oversight that was not present prior to the Watergate scandal and was a very powerful way to hold the government accountable. However this advocacy only involved a small percentage of the American public and was largely unnoticed outside the circle of political elites and activists. *United States v. Nixon* and the passage of the amendments to the Freedom of Information Act helped to strengthen oversight of government as well. The case confirmed that the system of checks and balances worked, and FOIA gave the media and the public unprecedented access to information about government actions.

²¹¹ *New York Times*, “Political Reversal,” *New York Times*, 23 Dec 1973, <http://ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/119750111?accountid=14434>, (accessed 8 April 2012).

However the political developments since the 1970's have weakened the impact of several other reforms. The Judicial Branch has overturned most strict campaign finance laws. 9/11 and the subsequent increases in the power of the president in the area of national security and foreign policy casts doubt on the effectiveness of constraints imposed by the War Powers Act and the results of the Church Committee.

Since the abuses of Watergate were closely associated with the presidency, Watergate presented a special challenge for presidents after Nixon to restore confidence in the government. Ford's pardon of Richard Nixon and Carter's disastrous domestic and foreign policies only increased the public distrust in government during the 1970's. In a *New York Times* editorial in 1979, Eugene Franklin effectively captured the feelings of the American people in the wake of these failures. He stated that Americans were ready for a fundamental change from the 1970's and said that, "staring into the night, we feel a tortured prologue is coming to an end. We rush to the edge of the platform, relieved as never before to be rid of the staying guests of the 70's, and eager to embrace the arriving 80's."²¹² Reagan successfully capitalized on this desire and on the failures of the 1970's with a strong anti-government message. He challenged the idea that an active government was a good thing and emphasized the belief that the American people were best suited to solve the nation's problems.

This message shaped the politics of the next few decades. It ended the long period of Democratic dominance on the national stage and the New Deal political consensus. It reinvigorated the Republican Party and the conservative movement as a whole. It also

²¹² Eugene Franklin, "The Looming 80's," *The New York Times* 2 December 1979, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/123908418/135F60435E15B0107A3/3?accountid=14434> (accessed 8 April 2012).

reflected the conservative public view of the role of government in the 1990's. It allowed Bill Clinton to successfully move the mainstream of the Democratic Party to the center and closer to ideas of fiscal responsibility and free trade. Reagan's enduring popularity and the restored prosperity and prestige that American experienced in the 1980's and 1990's eventually created a powerful myth that Reagan was the major cause of these changes in American politics. His personal charisma, political talents and foresight did help cement the conservative shift in the public's view of government. However Reagan's message would not have been successful without Watergate. Watergate highlighted many problems of government institutions and political leadership in the 1970's and previous decades. Watergate is what caused the public to originally question the New Deal assumption that government was a good thing and could solve national problems. This shift is what allowed Reagan to successfully capitalize on many previous failures and the post-Watergate distrust. The important role that Watergate played in Reagan's success and in changing American's view of government demonstrates that the myth that Reagan alone reshaped politics in the United States is entirely false. It also means that the myth's growing power is troubling because the public, scholars, and political elites in both parties continue to embrace it.

Watergate completely reshaped politics in the United States, but its ultimate legacy is mixed. Corruption on the level of Watergate is now more difficult to achieve because the distrust generated from the scandal created many new safeguards against government abuse of power. However the increased distrust and new negative view of government is very counter-productive. The political culture in the aftermath of Watergate is characterized by the politics of scandal, polarization and distrust. The media

and political actors are obsessed with rooting out evidence of government corruption or personal failures, no matter how small or insignificant they might be. This process has cheapened dialogue in the United States and only deepened the divisions among the public and political elite. The government has not regained the trust it lost during the 1970's, and this is a tragedy because one of the cornerstones of the democratic process is the belief that the government should act in the public interest. This should encourage people to have faith in the political process. Watergate erased the positive view of government and public distrust has made it more difficult for the government to take any steps to address the many serious problems that the United States continues to face. The events of the 1970's and 1980's still push the public to question the integrity of both politicians and the political system and this trend shows no signs of abating any time soon.

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