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# Ten Years Later, the Impact of Watergate

The White House, Congress, FBI, CIA—much of government was altered by the scandal that cost a President his office. Now, experts say that some of the effects are fading.

Watergate: A trauma that forever transformed America, or merely a historical footnote?

Ten years ago on August 9, a disgraced Richard Nixon ended a national nightmare by resigning the Presidency under threat of impeachment.

Today, the lasting significance of the events that began with a botched burglary of the Democratic headquarters in Washington's Watergate office complex and ended with the fall of an administration is still hotly debated.

Evidence of Watergate's impact abounds—a less arrogant Presidency, a more assertive Congress, a more responsible Federal Bureau of Investigation and Central Intelligence Agency, a more open bureaucracy and a more tightly controlled federal-election system.

The scandal's chief legacy, in the view of many experts, has been to instill in all public officials a sense of accountability often missing before Watergate. "In all three branches of government," observes senior FBI aide John Hotis, "officials now look not only at the legality of their conduct but also the propriety."

But with the dimming of memories—dramatized by Nixon's own emergence from the shadows of disgrace—many experts see the changes wrought by Watergate becoming blurred as the government slides back to its pre-Watergate ways. "For a time, Washington seemed aware of the dangerous fruits of secrecy," says Archibald Cox, the special Watergate prosecutor fired by Nixon. "Unfortunately, there is reason to believe the lesson is being forgotten."

Of most concern to reformers like Cox: The continuing impact of big-money contributors on politics, a Reagan administration drive to weaken post-Watergate restrictions on the FBI and revelations that the CIA still conducts covert activities without fully informing responsible officials.

The Watergate crucible showed that the system of checks and balances worked, but it exposed serious problems—a Presidency that had become all-powerful, a growing government taste for secrecy, a political system rife with corruption and a Congress reluctant to probe the Executive Branch.

The reform mood that swept the capital in the scandal's aftermath spawned many changes. Politicians were subjected to new ethics and campaign rules. The intelligence community came under close scrutiny. Federal agencies moved to insulate themselves against further abuses. Procedures were established under the Freedom of Information Act for public access to previously withheld government records. And Congress, anxious to end the "imperial Presidency," sought to regain its lost status as a co-equal branch.

## The White House: Power Eroded

Watergate's shadow lies most heavily over the White House.

Aides must now comply with both tough ethics standards and rules that discourage use of federal agencies for political purposes—a major contributor to Nixon's downfall.

Most important, experts conclude, is that the public no longer perceives the President as a near-mythical being who can do no wrong. The trust-shattering combination of Watergate and Vietnam, followed by the weakened tenures of Presidents Ford and Carter, ended that. Explains Thomas Cronin, professor of political science at Colorado College: "The storybook or the textbook Presidency—the romanticized view taught to schoolchildren that the President must know best—is no longer present."

Adds political scientist Louis W. Koenig of New York University: "The Presidency has come off its pedestal."

The Presidency today is a far cry from the office as Nixon and some of his predecessors knew it. Apart from Vietnam, Nixon conducted foreign policy with little interference from Congress. When he found fault with budget outlays, he impounded funds. When oversight of federal agencies became a problem, he appointed department heads as White House counselors, thus shielding them from a prying Congress under a cloak of "executive privilege."

Ronald Reagan's powers are more limited. Although hailed as the strongest post-Watergate President, he often complains of undue constraints placed on him by Congress, particularly in the areas of budget and foreign affairs. Also, the Supreme Court has barred Presidents from holding back appropriated funds and from imposing so-called executive privilege to shield illegalities.

Where Nixon and his predecessors often exposed U.S. troops to hostile situations abroad, Reagan must seek Congress's approval. Last winter, the lawmakers invoked the War Powers Act—a byproduct of Vietnam and Watergate—to impose an 18-month deadline on U.S. participation in the multinational peacekeeping force in Lebanon. More recently, they shut off U.S. aid to the CIA-backed rebels fighting Nicaragua's leftist government.

The changes go beyond power. Ethical standards, say officials, are much higher than in Nixon's day. "People are much more aware and sophisticated about the potential for appearances of impropriety," comments White House legal counsel Fred Fielding, who brings to his present job the perspective of a man who also served Nixon as an aide.

Stricter standards are evident in the fate of several Reagan administration officials, starting with former national security adviser Richard Allen. Allen felt obliged to quit in 1982 amid a dispute over the origin and purpose of \$1,000 in cash that turned up in his office safe.

Similarly, Max Hugel had only briefly been chief of the CIA's clandestine operations when he was asked to step down because of questions about his business dealings. A dozen top officials of the Environmental Protection Agency quit in a flap over political misuse of the Superfund toxic-waste cleanup program. Currently, the Justice Department has an independent investigator looking into the finances of Edwin Meese, Reagan's nominee for Attorney General.

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