

What was behind Nixon's downfall?

written by Stephen Millies

July 1, 2022



University of Minnesota students protest against the U.S. invasion of Cambodia, May 1972.

Fifty years ago, the offices of the Democratic Party's National Committee were burglarized on June 17, 1972. The crime at the Watergate complex led to President Richard Nixon's resignation on Aug. 8, 1974.

The Watergate scandal's anniversary is occurring during the congressional hearings into Trump's attempted coup on Jan. 6, 2021. The fascist insurrection inside the Capitol, which was tolerated for hours by the Pentagon, was extremely dangerous.

However, there's no mention of Trump's June 1, 2020, coup attempt, one week after George Floyd was murdered. Trump led the Pentagon's high command and police to disperse an anti-racist protest across from the White House with clubs and tear gas. Trump wanted to declare martial law to crush the Black Lives Matter movement and send troops to shoot demonstrators across the United States.

And where was the investigation into the stolen 2000 presidential election? Five members of the U.S. Supreme Court upheld George W. Bush's election despite Bush Junior getting 543,895 less votes than his Democratic opponent Al Gore.

John Bolton — who later became Trump's national security advisor — led the "Brooks Brothers riot" that forced election officials in Miami-Dade county to stop counting ballots. (It was named the "Brooks Brothers riot" after the expensive clothing store because the Republican thugs were so well dressed.)

Trump is a far richer and stupider version of Nixon. Both scoundrels were corrupt and racist. Nixon had a greater opportunity to be a war criminal, with millions of victims in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

The corporate media usually describes the Watergate scandal as a struggle to "defend democracy and the rule of law." What democracy was there in the Black colony of Washington, D.C., where people couldn't elect their own mayor until 1974?

The U.S. capital has more people than Vermont or Wyoming, and almost as many as

Alaska or North Dakota. Yet D.C. is still denied statehood because two more Black senators would be elected.

Since the Watergate era, U.S. capitalism's "rule of law" has [increased the number of prisoners five-fold](#). Over two million poor people are locked up, the majority of whom are Black, Indigenous or Latinx.

The plumbers

Millions of people viewed the hearings of the Senate Watergate Committee in May 1973. They were appalled and sometimes amused by the partial revelation of Nixon's crimes.

The White House "plumbers" were exposed. This gang of ex-FBI and maybe not so ex-CIA agents were supposed to stop the leaks of information about Nixon's crimes. Its leader was long-time CIA operative E. Howard Hunt.

Before committing the Watergate burglary, the plumbers' target was former Pentagon analyst Daniel Ellsberg. He leaked the "Pentagon Papers" to the media, which exposed the lies U.S. presidents had told about the Vietnam War.

The Nixon Administration went to court trying to prevent the Washington Post and New York Times from publishing some of them. Ellsberg faced a long prison sentence, but his charges were dropped after the plumbers' burglary of his psychiatrist was discovered.

Fifty years later, Julian Assange is in a British jail facing extradition to the United States for exposing the truth about U.S. war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq.

None of the Watergate committee's seven U.S. senators were women. Senator Sam Ervin of North Carolina was the committee's chair. The media's crush on the segregationist led to "Quotations from Chairman Sam" being published.

Ervin had tried to block the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act that repealed the viciously racist 1924 immigration act. “I don’t know of any contributions that Ethiopia has made to the making of America,” [said the senator](#), in trying to limit immigration to white people from Western Europe. In 1970, Ervin joined the filibuster that attempted to stop extending the Voting Rights Act.

Another committee member was Georgia Senator Herman Talmadge. Like Ervin, Talmadge had voted against both the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Many believe his daddy, former Georgia Gov. Eugene Talmadge, [had four Black people lynched](#) in 1946 to win reelection. Talmadge’s father also set up a concentration camp for workers during the 1934 textile strike. (“Testing the New Deal: The General Textile Strike of 1934 in the American South” by Janet Irons.)

Making the dollar world money

Both Ervin and Talmadge were white supremacists. So what was their beef with Nixon?

Behind Nixon’s fall was a crisis of U.S. imperialism. Its dirty war against Vietnam and Laos was lost. At tremendous cost, the Soviet Union was able to achieve nuclear parity with the U.S.

The billionaires had selected Nixon to clean up the mess. But the long slide of U.S. economic dominance versus its European and Japanese capitalist rivals continued.

From producing half of the world’s industrial goods in 1945, the U.S. [now makes just a sixth](#). U.S. corporations, however, have \$6 trillion in foreign investments, which includes factories around the globe.

Black people were in revolt, with 200 cities on fire following Dr. Martin Luther King

Jr.'s assassination in 1968. Nixon's presidential campaign called for "law and order," an undisguised call for a racist crack-down. Nixon promised to fire Attorney General Ramsey Clark.

Nixon's vice-presidential running mate Spiro T. Agnew's specialty was making crude, bigoted remarks. Agnew was appealing to the followers of former Alabama Gov. George Wallace, who was running for president as a virtual Klansman.

Nixon and the FBI targeted the Black Panther Party for extermination. At least 25 Panthers were murdered, including Fred Hampton and Mark Clark on Dec. 4, 1969. The FBI's COINTELPRO program sought to wreck all progressive movements and organizations.

It was much harder to get rid of the corporations' dependence on Black labor. Black workers were key to winning the 1970 postal workers strike that Nixon tried to break with federal troops.

On July 24, 1973, two Black workers — Larry Carter and Issac Shorter — turned off the power at Chrysler's Jefferson Avenue assembly plant in Detroit. The result was the first big sitdown strike in 36 years.

Fifty years ago, a quarter of U.S. auto and steel workers were Black. They helped lead a [record number of 6,074 strikes](#) in 1974.

This strike wave followed the expiration of Nixon's wage and price controls, which were imposed in 1971. His simultaneous abolition of the gold standard made the U.S. paper dollar world money.

This was Nixon's greatest gift to Wall Street. It allows the U.S. to roll up huge trade deficits every year.

The cheap shoes, clothing and other consumer goods bought by a working class

that's only 10% unionized has allowed capitalists to keep wages low. Instead of buying U.S. goods with dollars, capitalist regimes abroad hold [\\$7.55 trillion in U.S. government debt](#). This helps finance the huge Pentagon war budget.

Southern textile strategy

Nixon squeaked by the Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey in 1968. Among the reasons given for Nixon's victory was its celebrated "Southern strategy."

This was the deliberate appeal to racist voters in the South, as well as bigots in the rest of the country. Of the 22 U.S. senators from 11 states that made up the slave owners' confederacy, 18 are currently Republicans.

In 1968, however, this political formula could be better described as a "Southern textile strategy." South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond's machine threw its support to Nixon because of the specific needs of textile capital.

Thurmond's ally — the union-busting textile baron Roger Milliken — became Nixon's finance chairman. Milliken was no mint julep-drinking southern aristocrat. He came from an old Yankee capitalist family whose fortune began by [making Union Army uniforms](#) during the U.S. civil war.

Milliken took the family fortune south though his company's headquarters remained for years in New York City. The South was the textile industry's salvation from unionism. By 1961, 89% of U.S. textiles were made in the region.

After workers in his Darlington, South Carolina, mill voted to join the Textile Workers Union in 1956, Milliken shut the plant down rather than negotiate a contract. This was completely illegal, but Milliken's lawyers dragged out proceedings for years before paying damages.

Key to keeping unions out of the textile belt was refusing to hire Black workers.

When Ezell Blair Jr., Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeill and David Richmond began their sit-in at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, on Feb. 1, 1960, just 3.3% of textile workers were Black.

By 1978, Black workers "held a quarter of all production jobs in the Southern textile industry." ("Hiring the Black Worker: The Racial Integration of the Southern Textile Industry, 1960-1980" by Timothy J. Minchin)

Nixon couldn't stop this change, even though one of his first presidential acts was refusing to enforce anti-discrimination provisions in military contracts held by three big textile outfits. Nor could Nixon, under trade agreements, stop the growing amount of textile imports.

Family Assistance Plan

Roger Milliken and Strom Thurmond didn't like these developments. Neither did the other reactionary members of Congress from the textile belt that stretched from southern Virginia through the Carolinas to Georgia and Alabama.

Thurmond was the living symbol of the lynch rope. As a judge he sentenced four people to South Carolina's electric chair, all of whom were Black.

Among those electrocuted was Sam Osborne, a Black teenaged sharecropper who shot his armed and drunken white landlord in self-defense. The Second Amendment was never meant for oppressed people.

In 1948 Thurmond ran as the presidential candidate of the segregationist States Rights' Democratic Party. Twenty years later he was instrumental in putting Nixon in the White House.

With the Voting Rights Act passed and more Black workers being hired in Southern factories, the Thumonds wanted Black people to leave. With many Northern cities

becoming close to a majority Black, New York Gov. Nelson Rockefeller wanted Black people driven back south.

“They flooded into the big Northern cities,” was how the billionaire described Black and Puerto Rican people in testimony to the Senate Finance Committee. Rockefeller also lamented that those of “European origin” were leaving the cities to go to the suburbs.

This was the racist background to Nixon’s Family Assistance Plan. FAP was the brainchild of Nixon advisor and future Senator Patrick Moynihan. In 1965, Moynihan wrote a notorious report for the U.S. Department of Labor blaming Black poverty on Black women.

FAP payments would be set above the miserable benefits in Southern states. But they would be far below the Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) payments in New York, Wisconsin, Oregon and other Northern states where the labor movement was stronger.

FAP supporters believed that if welfare benefits were raised in the South, but lowered in the North, Black migration would cease. This lie was the excuse for Wisconsin’s state legislature to cancel a winter coat allowance for poor families. It was really factory owners like Wisconsin foundry owner William Grede, a founder of the John Birch Society, who summoned Black labor north.

The National Welfare Rights Organization, under the leadership of Dr. George Wiley, fought FAP. NWRO activist Lucille Berrien and Rev. James Groppi led a takeover of Wisconsin’s state capitol in Madison to demand winter coats for the poor.

But it was right-wingers centered in the South, like Strom Thurmond, who torpedoed FAP. This amounted to a dangerous split in Nixon’s coalition.

The Pentagon vs Nixon

The generals and admirals also came to distrust Nixon. Since World War II, the military-industrial complex has been the biggest factor in U.S. politics.

No questions were asked when Lincoln fired General McClellan twice during the U.S. Civil War. During the Korean War, Truman had to fly to the middle of the Pacific Ocean to get permission from the other generals to sack General Douglas MacArthur.

It was the military that stopped Senator Joe McCarthy, not liberals like television broadcaster Edward R. Murrow. When McCarthy insulted General Ralph Zwicker during a Senate committee hearing, it was time for Joe to go.

Interestingly, the army secretary at the time was Robert T. Stevens. He was past and future CEO of J.P. Stevens, then the second biggest textile manufacturer.

Like the Milliken clan, the Stevens family was an old Yankee family that took their textile mills south to get away from unions. None of the media asked what Stevens—a recipient of lush military contracts—was doing as army secretary.

During the presidential campaign, Nixon won votes by saying he had a plan to bring U.S. troops home from Vietnam. Once in the White House, Nixon escalated the dirty war by invading Cambodia.

Never forget that Nixon could have signed the same peace agreement in 1969 that he finally did in 1973. Millions of lives could have been saved in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, as well as 20,000 fewer GIs coming home in boxes.

Despite the massive bombing and Kissinger's barely disguised threats at the Paris Peace Talks to use nuclear weapons, Vietnam refused to surrender. At the same time, Nixon and Kissinger were working overtime to further the split in the socialist camp between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China.

Nixon's recognition of the Soviet Union's nuclear arsenal parity with the U.S. was recognizing what already existed. That doesn't mean the Pentagon appreciated it nor the arms treaties that were signed.

At the same time, much of the military-industrial complex wanted to pull troops out of Vietnam faster. Congressional warhawk Melvin Laird, who became Nixon's secretary of defense, pushed for a quicker exit.

Laird and the military brass didn't care how many children were being burned alive by napalm. They wanted to get out because they were losing control of their troops.

Hundreds of officers were killed—"fragged" —by GIs, usually by grenade. By 1971, mutinies like the one at Firebase Pace became front-page news. The anti-war, anti-racist American Servicemen's Union recruited thousands of members.

The unstoppable drive for Black liberation had arrived inside the military machine and was influencing some white GIs as well. White GIs blew up Camp McCoy in Wisconsin in 1970 to stop the training of National Guard troops to shoot Black people. A rebellion against racism on the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk broke out on Oct. 13, 1972.

Spies turn on Nixon

Millions of people protested Nixon's invasion of Cambodia in 1970. Nixon provoked the killing of students at Jackson State and Kent State universities by calling anti-war demonstrators "bums."

In response to this revolt, the White House held a secret meeting on June 5, 1970, to discuss a police-state plan devised by White House staffer Tom Huston. The [super-sized COINTELPRO program](#) aimed to unite the FBI, CIA and other spy agencies to smash all progressive movements.

Even though FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover was slated to chair the new outfit, he disliked it because it took away the FBI's monopoly on crushing political dissent.

People were shocked when the Huston plan was partially exposed during the Senate Watergate hearings. The 2001 Patriot Act implemented some of it.

Hoover's distrust of the Huston plan was another sign that parts of the deep state had differences with Nixon. The prized secret informant for Washington Post reporter Bob Woodward was FBI Deputy Director Mark Felt.

The Watergate burglary happened over four months before the 1972 presidential election. This crime wasn't allowed to interfere with Nixon's landslide victory.

Once the peace agreement with Vietnam was signed, however, the dam broke. On March 21, 1972, James McCord Jr. — who led the Watergate burglary crew — wrote from jail to Judge John Sirica that the White House was behind the break-in.

Longtime CIA agent McCord never thought his gang would be discovered by the \$2-an-hour security guard Frank Wills. McCord had cleaned up the room at New York's Hotel Pennsylvania where U.S. Army anthrax expert Frank Olson may have been thrown to his death in 1953.

While McCord spent just four months in jail, the Black man Frank Wills—the real hero of Watergate—could hardly get any more jobs and died in poverty.

McCord wasn't the only deep state player who helped bring down Nixon. Bob Woodward himself was a Naval intelligence officer before becoming a reporter.

And it was the former Air Force Col. Alexander Butterfield that revealed the White House tapes, the Watergate scandal's "smoking gun."

A continuing crisis

Richard Nixon was the only U.S. president that didn't preside over a single state or federal execution. Both the Environmental Protection Agency and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration were established under "Tricky Dick."

Despite mobilizing the army, Nixon couldn't stop postal workers from winning their strike. The 1970 strike against General Motors won United Auto Workers members retirement after 30 years and 95% of their pay during layoffs.

Nixon didn't want to be known for any of these things. His cabinet was the last one that didn't have anyone who was a woman or a person of color.

But what was Nixon to do when 29.1% of workers belonged to unions in 1970, as compared to 10.3% in 2021?

It was the military that played a key role in dumping Nixon. But the crisis continued under the new president, Gerald Ford. Ford's vice-president was Nelson Rockefeller, from the world's first billionaire family that founded Big Oil.

A Vietnamese tank rammed through the gate of the former U.S. embassy in South Vietnam on April 30, 1975. Vietnam had won. In November of that year, the Angolan people with Cuban assistance threw back the invasion of the U.S.-backed South African apartheid regime.

Ford was shot at twice, once by "Squeaky" Fromme, a known follower of Charles Manson. How did the Secret Service let that happen?

There's no stability under capitalist rule. The U.S. Supreme Court's elimination of reproductive rights is a huge crisis both for the people and the ruling class.

Nixon was an enemy of the people. So is Trump and his Supreme Court. Only by organizing the power of the people can we stop these attacks.



<https://www.struggle-la-lucha.org/2022/07/01/what-was-behind-nixons-downfall/>