

# H-Net Reviews

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Stanley I. Kutler, ed. *Watergate: The Fall of Richard M. Nixon*. St. James, N.Y.: Brandywine Press, 1996. xxi + 229 pp. \$16.50 (paper), ISBN 978-1-881089-30-8.

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## A Watergate Anthology

*Watergate*, one of the Brandywine Press's series of topical American history textbooks, appeared just in time for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the June 17, 1972 break-in at the Democratic National Headquarters. It chronicles Nixon's "fall" through a collection of readings selected, edited, and introduced by Stanley Kutler (Edwin I. Fox Professor of American Institutions, University of Wisconsin). Kutler is an exceptionally well qualified editor, having already completed the first full-scale treatment of the subject by a historian, *The Wars of Watergate* (1990).[1] He also recently won a four-year legal battle with the National Archives and the Nixon estate to have the remaining White House tapes released. He says he chose these readings to present "a factual narrative of the key players, events, and moments in the nation's most memorable constitutional crisis since the disputed presidential election of 1876," and "provide some understanding of the political passion and turmoil that so engulfed the nation" (p. xi). He accomplishes his first goal, but is less successful in achieving the second.

Kutler opens with "Watergate: A Brief History," followed by "The Cast of Characters." The history is indeed brief (four pages), and the "Cast of Characters," although useful, has some surprising omissions (Robert Bork and Fred Thompson, for example). He then plunges into the readings, which are organized into seven chapters. In the first three he quickly covers the period from 1968 to the break-in. Kutler presents Nixon as a President who micro-managed everything that involved the White House because of "his abiding interest in his own image and his dealings with opponents" (p. 7). He introduces

the "plumbers" and the "Enemies List." He also includes *Washington Post* articles from June 18, 19, and 20 (only the June 19 article has a Woodward and Bernstein by-line), and readings chosen to establish the relationship between the break-in and the Committee to Re-Elect the President (CREEP) and suggest a White House connection.

The next three chapters—the bulk of the book—are devoted to the attempts by the President and his inner circle of advisors to first control the damage, and later save the Administration. Kutler moves methodically through the planning of the cover-up, the trial of the Watergate burglars, the defections of John Dean and Jeb Magruder, the trial of Daniel Ellsberg, the resignations of Haldeman and Ehrlichman, the appointment of Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox, the Ervin Committee hearings, the long battle for the tapes, the Agnew resignation, the "Saturday Night Massacre," the appointment of Leon Jaworski as Cox's replacement, and the eighteen and a half-minute gap in the crucial June 20, 1972 tape.

The final chapter documents the impeachment debates in the House Judiciary Committee, the resignation, and the pardon. Here Kutler focuses on Nixon's claim of executive privilege to prevent the release of more of the tapes, a claim that ended with the unanimous ruling of the Supreme Court in *U.S. v. Nixon*.

Each group of readings begins with a short introduction. Kutler also includes, as an appendix, the final report of the Watergate Special Prosecution Force listing the status of all of the legal action taken against the par-

ticipants in the break-in and cover-up as of 1975. The Bibliographical Note is very brief, but might be useful as a starting point for undergraduates who wanted to learn more about the subject.

Kutler's editing is crisp and sure. He has taken his readings from a variety of sources, but most are public documents. Many are in the "Must Be Included" category—key conversations from the White House tapes, excerpts from John Dean's Senate Watergate committee testimony, and the Articles of Impeachment are almost obligatory. Others have not been widely reprinted—the *Time* and *Chicago Tribune* editorials calling for Nixon's resignation, for example. There are also some hard-to-find gems like internal White House memoranda (from the Nixon Archives at the National Archives), Deputy CIA Director Vernon Walters' memoranda documenting the fact that the agency refused to participate in the cover-up (from the exhibits presented to the Senate Select Committee), and James McCord's letter to Judge "Maximum John" Sirica linking the administration to the break-in (from the transcript of *U.S. v. Liddy, et. al.*).

At 229 pages, *Watergate* is obviously not intended to be the definitive collection of readings on the subject. Kutler is able to produce a short yet coherent anthology—no mean feat—by focusing on the major events of the Watergate affair: the break-in and cover-up, the battle for the tapes, and the resignation and pardon. The focus, in other words, is on Richard Nixon, who gets both the first word ("it's time for some honest talk about the problem of order in the United States" [p. 3]), and the last ("Watergate ... is a burden I shall bear for every day of the life that is left to me" [p. 213]).

This is both a strength and a weakness. On the one hand, Kutler's tight focus allows him to tell a very complex story clearly. And here, as in *The Wars of Watergate*, it is clear that Kutler sees Watergate as a "constitutional crisis." Thus, legal and constitutional issues are emphasized in the selection and editing of the readings, almost all of which are quoted or referred to specifically in his earlier book. The path from the break-in to the resignation is straight and plainly marked, and there are few distractions along the way.

On the other hand, the tightly focused readings and commentary do not provide as clear an understanding of the "passion and turmoil that so engulfed the nation"

during the second Nixon Administration. Watergate was "a 'story' and a scandal as well as a constitutional crisis,"[2] but several Watergate subplots that contributed to the public's attitude toward the Nixon White House (Nixon's income tax problems, for example) remain in the background. The emotions of the Watergate era are also bound up in the passion and turmoil of the times, as Kutler himself points out in *The Wars of Watergate*. But his "brief history" in this book tells us nothing about the United States during the Nixon presidency. He says only that some members of Nixon's staff "had begun to use their power to pursue partisan vendettas"; these "conservative young lawyers and former advertising men[,] ... claiming that the national interest required Nixon's reelection, justified crimes as necessary for national security" (p. xiii). And the readings, most of them in the language of official statements, public hearings, and legal proceedings, do not convey the emotion generated by the conflicts that had reconfigured American politics by 1972.

In *The Wars of Watergate*, Kutler places events in their broader historical context and reflects on their lasting importance. In *Watergate: The Fall of Richard Nixon*, he has more limited goals. As promised, the book does cover the "key players, events, and moments" of the central Watergate story. Students using it as a textbook probably will need more background information than Kutler provides, but after reading it they should know the sequence of major Watergate events from 1972 to 1974, and understand the case against Nixon. And anyone who wants a brief primer on the "Watergate affair" will find it to be a valuable reference.

#### Notes:

[1]. Kutler, Stanley I. 1990. *The Wars of Watergate: The Last Crisis of Richard Nixon*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

[2]. Schudson, Michael. 1992. *Watergate in American Memory: How We Remember, Forget, and Reconstruct the Past*. New York: Basic Books.

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