

# The Death Toll of Watergate

**Exclusive:** Major gaps in the history of Watergate and Iran-Contra have let Republicans minimize those scandals by comparing them to the fabricated “scandal” over the Benghazi attacks. A fuller understanding of Watergate would reveal its links to Richard Nixon’s prolonging the Vietnam War, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Republicans are fond of comparing their scandal-mongering like the current hype over the terrorist assault on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya with genuine scandals, like Watergate, which sank Richard Nixon’s second term, and Iran-Contra, which marred Ronald Reagan’s last two years in office.

The GOP’s false equivalence represents both an effort to puff up their latest accusations against Democrats and an attempt to minimize the misconduct of those two Republican presidents. For instance, one favorite GOP comment about Benghazi is: “No one died at Watergate. Four brave Americans died in Benghazi.”

This apples-and-oranges sophistry misses the point that Watergate and Iran-Contra were complex conspiracies that required intensive investigations to unravel their secrets (many of which remain hidden or in dispute to this day) while the Benghazi affair boils down to an easily resolved question as to why the U.S. intelligence community withheld some of the details in the immediate aftermath of the attack last Sept. 11.

The answers seem to be that the Benghazi consulate had evolved into a CIA base for secret operations and that U.S. intelligence didn’t want to tip off the attack’s perpetrators regarding how much the agency knew about their identities. So, the word “extremists” replaced specific groups and the CIA affiliation of two slain Americans was withheld.

By contrast, the history of Watergate is still substantially misunderstood even by supposed experts. Evidence from the National Archives now indicates that Nixon’s Watergate operation linked back to his 1968 campaign’s sabotage of President Lyndon Johnson’s Vietnam peace talks, an operation that Johnson privately called “treason.”

As I explain in my new book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, Johnson had learned, in the days before Election 1968, that Nixon’s campaign was keeping the South Vietnamese away from the Paris talks. LBJ even confronted Nixon by phone just two days before the election. Nixon denied any skullduggery but Johnson didn’t

believe him.

Nixon's campaign feared that if Johnson did achieve a Vietnam peace breakthrough, which was then in the offing, Vice President Hubert Humphrey would likely win the election, consigning Nixon to another bitter defeat.

There was also the possibility that if Johnson went public with what he knew about the Nixon campaign's interference with the negotiations while a half million American troops were in the Vietnam war zone and more than 30,000 had already died the disclosure might put Humphrey over the top.

But Johnson's advisers feared what might happen to the country's unity if Nixon's maneuver were revealed and he still went on to victory. They foresaw a dangerously weakened president and national disorder. As Defense Secretary Clark Clifford told Johnson in a conference call:

"Some elements of the story are so shocking in their nature that I'm wondering whether it would be good for the country to disclose the story and then possibly have a certain individual [Nixon] elected. It could cast his whole administration under such doubt that I think it would be inimical to our country's interests."

So, Johnson kept quiet; Nixon narrowly won the election; and the Paris peace talks remained stalled for the remainder of LBJ's presidency. Johnson's only revenge was to order his national security aide Walt Rostow to remove from the White House the file of "top secret" wiretap transcripts and other evidence of Nixon's gambit when Johnson's term ended on Jan. 20, 1969. Rostow labeled the file "The 'X' Envelope."

### **Hoover's Tip**

Early in his presidency, Nixon received unsettling news from FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover about how much Johnson knew about the Vietnam peace sabotage. Hoover described a widespread wiretapping operation against Nixon's campaign. Hoover apparently overstated the extent of the actual wiretapping, but the report unnerved Nixon.

Nixon ordered his top assistants, White House chief of staff H.R. Haldeman and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger, to track down the file, which they discovered was missing. They managed to reconstruct much of what had been in the file but they didn't know where the original documents had gone.

The missing file became a sudden crisis for Nixon in mid-June 1971 when the New York Times began publishing the Pentagon Papers, a secret history of the Vietnam War from 1945 to 1967, which exposed many of the lies behind the war, mostly

told by Democrats.

However, as the Pentagon Papers dominated the front pages of U.S. newspapers in June 1971, Nixon understood something that few others did that there was a shocking sequel to the Pentagon Papers, a secret file explaining how Nixon had torpedoed Johnson's peace talks in 1968 and thus extended the war for several more years.

In other words, there was a file that could doom Nixon's reelection in 1972 or possibly worse, result in his impeachment and even his prosecution. Nixon had not only continued the war, with the hope of getting his South Vietnamese allies a better deal than Johnson would have given them, but he had escalated the war with an invasion of Cambodia in 1970.

Beyond the unspeakable bloodshed in Indochina, the United States had been torn apart domestically with parents turning against their children, with massive street protests against the war, and with four American students slain at Kent State in Ohio and two at Jackson State in Mississippi.

### **The Missing File**

Nixon was reminded of his vulnerability when the first installments of the Pentagon Papers were published in mid-June 1971. Just four days after the Times began publishing the leaked history, one of Nixon's Oval Office tapes on June 17, 1971 recorded him demanding extraordinary measures to locate the missing file.

Nixon's team referred to the file as related to Johnson's Vietnam bombing halt of Oct. 31, 1968, but the file encompassed LBJ's failed peace negotiations and more importantly the Republican sabotage of those talks, a reality that Nixon understood from Hoover's briefing.

"Do we have it?" a perturbed Nixon asked Haldeman about the file. "I've asked for it. You said you didn't have it."

Haldeman responded, "We can't find it."

Kissinger added, "We have nothing here, Mr. President."

Nixon: "Well, damnit, I asked for that because I need it."

Kissinger: "But Bob and I have been trying to put the damn thing together."

Haldeman: "We have a basic history in constructing our own, but there is a file on it."

Nixon: "Where?"

Haldeman: "[Presidential aide Tom Charles] Huston swears to God that there's a file on it and it's at Brookings."

Nixon: "Bob? Bob? Now do you remember Huston's plan [for White House-sponsored break-ins as part of domestic counter-intelligence operations]? Implement it."

Kissinger: "Now Brookings has no right to have classified documents."

Nixon: "I want it implemented. Goddamnit, get in and get those files. Blow the safe and get it."

Haldeman: "They may very well have cleaned them by now, but this thing, you need to "

Kissinger: "I wouldn't be surprised if Brookings had the files."

Haldeman: "My point is Johnson knows that those files are around. He doesn't know for sure that we don't have them around."

But Johnson did know that the file was no longer at the White House because he had ordered Walt Rostow to remove it in the final days of his own presidency.

### **Hiring Hunt**

On June 30, 1971, Nixon again berated Haldeman about the need to break into Brookings and "take it [the file] out." Nixon even suggested using former CIA officer E. Howard Hunt (who later oversaw the two Watergate break-ins in May and June of 1972) to conduct the Brookings break-in.

"You talk to Hunt," Nixon told Haldeman. "I want the break-in. Hell, they do that. You're to break into the place, rifle the files, and bring them in. Just go in and take it. Go in around 8:00 or 9:00 o'clock."

Haldeman: "Make an inspection of the safe."

Nixon: "That's right. You go in to inspect the safe. I mean, *clean it up*." For reasons that remain unclear, it appears that the planned Brookings break-in never took place, but Nixon's desperation to locate Johnson's peace-talk file was an important link in the chain of events that led to the creation of Nixon's Plumbers unit and then to Watergate.

Ironically, Walt Rostow made that link in his own mind when he had to decide what to do with "The 'X' Envelope" in the wake of Johnson's death on Jan. 22, 1973. On May 14, 1973, as Rostow pondered what to do, the Watergate scandal was spinning out of Nixon's control. In a three-page "memorandum for the record,"

Rostow reflected on what effect LBJ's public silence may have had on the unfolding Watergate scandal.

"I am inclined to believe the Republican operation in 1968 relates in two ways to the Watergate affair of 1972," Rostow wrote. He noted, first, that Nixon's operatives may have judged that their "enterprise with the South Vietnamese" in frustrating Johnson's last-ditch peace initiative had secured Nixon his narrow margin of victory over Hubert Humphrey in 1968.

"Second, they got away with it," Rostow wrote. "Despite considerable press commentary after the election, the matter was never investigated fully. Thus, as the same men faced the election in 1972, there was nothing in their previous experience with an operation of doubtful propriety (or, even, legality) to warn them off, and there were memories of how close an election could get and the possible utility of pressing to the limit and beyond." [To read Rostow's memo, [click here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).]

But there was a third link between Nixon's Vietnam gambit and Watergate, one that Rostow did not know: In Nixon's desperate search for the missing file, he had brought in E. Howard Hunt and created the team of burglars that later got trapped in Watergate.

### **What to Do?**

In spring 1973, Rostow struggled with the question of what to do with "The 'X' Envelope" as the Watergate scandal continued to deepen. On June 25, 1973, fired White House counsel John Dean delivered his blockbuster Senate testimony, claiming that Nixon got involved in the cover-up within days of the June 1972 burglary at the Democratic National Committee. Dean also asserted that Watergate was just part of a years-long program of political espionage directed by Nixon's White House.

The very next day, as headlines of Dean's testimony filled the nation's newspapers, Rostow reached his conclusion about what to do with "The 'X' Envelope." In longhand, he wrote a "Top Secret" note which read, "To be opened by the Director, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, not earlier than fifty (50) years from this date June 26, 1973."

In other words, Rostow intended this missing link of American history to stay missing for another half century. In a typed cover letter to LBJ Library director Harry Middleton, Rostow wrote: "Sealed in the attached envelope is a file President Johnson asked me to hold personally because of its sensitive nature. In case of his death, the material was to be consigned to the LBJ Library under conditions I judged to be appropriate."

“After fifty years the Director of the LBJ Library (or whomever may inherit his responsibilities, should the administrative structure of the National Archives change) may, alone, open this file. If he believes the material it contains should not be opened for research [at that time], I would wish him empowered to re-close the file for another fifty years when the procedure outlined above should be repeated.”

Ultimately, however, the LBJ Library didn't wait that long. After a little more than two decades, on July 22, 1994, the envelope was opened and the archivists began the process of declassifying the contents, some of which remain classified to this day.

Yet, Rostow's delay in releasing “The ‘X’ Envelope” had other political consequences. Since the full scope of Nixon's political intelligence operations were not understood in 1973-74, Washington's conventional wisdom adopted the mistaken lesson from the Watergate scandal that “the cover-up is worse than the crime.” What wasn't understood was how deep Nixon's villainy may have gone.

Another consequence is that Republicans still can disparage the significance of Watergate, sometimes referring to it as Nixon did, as “a third-rate burglary.” Not understanding the scope of criminality behind Nixon's clandestine operations, GOP officials even rate Watergate as less important than the current flap over Benghazi because supposedly “no one died in Watergate.”

However, if the full continuum of Watergate were recognized that it partly stemmed from a cover-up of Nixon's Vietnam War “treason” in 1968 the notion that “no one died” would sound like a sick joke.

Because Nixon extended the Vietnam War for four-plus years and expanded it into Cambodia, millions of people perished, the vast majority inhabitants of Indochina, but also more than 20,000 additional Americans. It is well past time that this more complete history is recognized.

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).**

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