

# Does Woodward Know Watergate?

**Exclusive:** Republicans are hyping the flap over Benghazi talking points by calling it “worse than Watergate,” a false narrative that Bob Woodward has helped along by ignoring new evidence connecting Richard Nixon’s sabotage of Vietnam War peace talks in 1968 to his political spying in 1971-72, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The Washington Post’s Bob Woodward has popped up on TV recently affirming a key Republican talking point, likening the “scandal” over the Obama administration’s Benghazi talking points to Richard Nixon’s Watergate scandal, which Woodward helped make famous.

But, as he joins in hyping the GOP’s Benghazi scandal-mongering, Woodward doesn’t appear to know that new documentary evidence has transformed our understanding of Watergate and especially its tie-in to the Vietnam War and how those documents make comparisons between Watergate and Benghazi both ludicrous and obscene.

During an appearance on MSNBC’s “Morning Joe” on May 17, Woodward compared the administration’s development of talking points for TV appearances by UN Ambassador Susan Rice in 2012 to Nixon’s mendacious editing of his Oval Office tapes to conceal the role of his reelection campaign in the break-in at the Democrats’ Watergate headquarters in 1972.

“You were talking earlier about kind of dismissing the Benghazi issue as one that’s just political and the president recently said it’s a sideshow,” Woodward said. “But if you read through all these e-mails, you see that everyone in the government is saying, ‘Oh, let’s not tell the public that terrorists were involved, people connected to al-Qaeda. Let’s not tell the public that there were warnings.’”

Then, noting that four U.S. diplomatic personnel died in the attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya, on Sept. 11, 2012, Woodward added, “I would not dismiss Benghazi. It’s a very serious issue. As people keep saying, four people were killed.”

But Woodward appears to have been relying on Republican talking points in his understanding of why Obama administration officials decided to leave out some details from Rice’s talking points, specifically a concern that divulging certain specifics would compromise the ongoing investigation to catch the

Islamic terrorist believed responsible.

At the time, there also remained genuine confusion over the connection between the Benghazi attack and angry demonstrations sweeping the Middle East over an American video mocking the Prophet Muhammad. Indeed, the recently released e-mails buttress then-CIA Director David Petraeus's testimony about concerns over the possibility of harming the investigation.

By contrast, Nixon systematically reviewed tape transcripts of his Oval Office conversations to remove sections that incriminated him and his top aides in a felonious cover-up. We also now know what Nixon's most dangerous secret was, i.e., why he hired ex-CIA officer E. Howard Hunt to organize an espionage team in the first place.

Nixon was terrified that a missing file might surface revealing FBI wiretaps of his 1968 campaign's sabotage of President Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam peace talks, a politically motivated case of obstruction that Johnson privately called "treason."

In other words, the ultimate secret of Watergate one that apparently still remains a mystery to Woodward was that Nixon was terrified that the American people might learn that he had extended the Vietnam War for an additional four years to get an edge in a political campaign.

As a result of LBJ's failed peace initiative, some 20,000 more U.S. soldiers died along with an estimated one million Vietnamese and countless more dead in Cambodia. The war also tore apart America's political and social fabric.

So, to put the flap over the Benghazi talking points in the same sentence with Nixon's Watergate crimes suggests either a complete lack of proportionality or some self-serving agenda. It's possible that Woodward doesn't want to acknowledge the new evidence because it would show that he missed the most important element of a scandal that made his career.

Recognition of the fuller Watergate scandal also would shatter a favorite saying of Official Washington, "the cover-up is worse than the crime." That surely wouldn't be true if the Watergate scandal were understood to encompass Nixon's treacherous scheme to block Johnson's Vietnam peace deal.

### **Memoirs and Documents**

We now know based on memoirs of principals and documents available at the LBJ Library in Austin, Texas, that in 1969, Johnson ordered his national security aide, Walt Rostow, to remove the wiretap file on Nixon's peace-talk sabotage from the White House and that Nixon later learned of the file's existence from

FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover

However, Nixon's senior advisers, Henry Kissinger and H.R. "Bob" Haldeman, were unable to locate the missing file, not realizing that it was in Rostow's personal possession. Nixon's concern about the incriminating wiretaps grew into a panic after June 13, 1971, when the New York Times began publishing the top-secret Pentagon Papers, which detailed the mostly Democratic lies that had drawn the United States into the Vietnam War from 1945 to 1967.

As those stories dominated the front pages of newspapers across the nation and the world, Nixon realized something that few others knew, that there was a sequel that was arguably even more scandalous, a file containing evidence of his campaign's successful sabotage of Johnson's peace talks, which could have negotiated an end to the war in 1968.

As the Pentagon Papers dominated the news, Nixon summoned Kissinger and Haldeman into the Oval Office again on June 17, 1971, and ordered them to redouble their efforts to locate the missing file. Nixon's panic is captured on an Oval Office tape that was made public decades ago but not fully understood.

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

Haldeman: "We can't find it."

Kissinger: "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 Rostow to remove it in the final days of his own presidency.

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 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 Brookings break-in never took place. Also unclear to historians was the full significance of the missing file. They knew that it had a connection to Johnson's peace initiative in October 1968 but they assumed, mistakenly, that it was a file containing policy papers, not wiretap evidence.

### **The 'X' Envelope**

The missing link to the story was filed away at the LBJ Library, where Rostow eventually deposited what he labeled "The 'X' Envelope." Rostow transferred the file to the library after Johnson's death in 1973 but with instructions that it not be opened for 50 years. Library officials eventually overrode Rostow's mandate but not until 1994 when the envelope was opened and declassification of its contents began.

But the two-decade delay caused serious damage to the historical record because, in the interim, a distorted narrative of the Watergate scandal had taken shape and solidified. Not knowing the contents of the missing file the one that Nixon thought might be at Brookings led Woodward and other Watergate reporters to concentrate on the cover-up, not the underlying crime.

Because of that mistaken focus, an entire generation of journalists cut their teeth saying, "The cover-up is worse than the crime." There also grew an

animosity toward evidence suggesting that Republicans would go behind the back of a Democratic president to undermine an important foreign policy initiative like, say, trying to end the Vietnam War. Somehow disclosing such facts was deemed not “good for the country.”

So, my discovery of the missing piece of the Watergate mosaic in 2012 was unwelcome news in many quarters, easier to ignore than to explain. However, the false narrative of Watergate is not old news; it has become a current reference point for Republican efforts to undermine another Democratic president on a foreign policy incident.

Because of the lack of proportionality made possible by the distorted Watergate narrative Sen. John McCain and other leading Republicans can breezily call the Benghazi story “worse” than Watergate. Then, by recycling some bad history, Bob Woodward contributes to the problem. [For details on Rostow’s “X Envelope,” see Robert Parry’s *America’s Stolen Narrative*.]

**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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