

If Watergate Happened Now

FROM A DISTANCE, WATERGATE SEEMS LIKE A PARTISAN affair. But that's because we tend to look at it nowadays through red- and blue-tinted glasses. In truth, President Nixon was forced to resign in 1974 by Republicans in Congress like Barry Goldwater, who realized from the so-called smoking-gun tape that he was a crook. This was after the Supreme Court—led by a Nixon

appointee—unanimously ruled against him in the tapes case.

But imagine if Nixon were president in this era. After he completed his successful second term, I'd have to write a retrospective column like this:

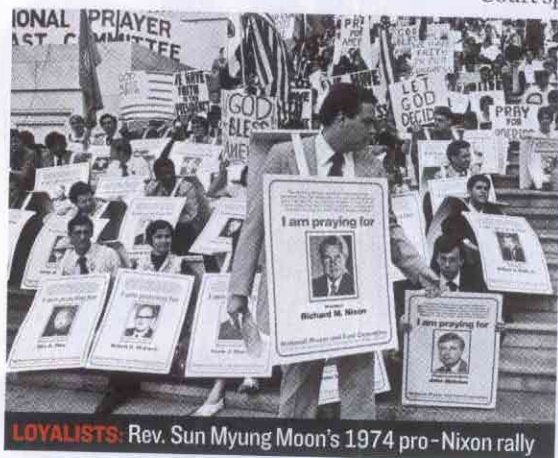
President Nixon left office in 2005 having proved me and the other “nattering nabobs of negativism” wrong. We thought that his administration was sleazy but we were never able to nail him. Those of us who hoped it would end differently knew we were in trouble when former Nixon media adviser Roger Ailes banned the word “Watergate” from Fox News's coverage and went with the logo “Assault on the Presidency” instead. By that time, the American people figured both sides were just spinning, and a tie always goes to the incumbent.

The big reason Nixon didn't have to resign: the rise of Conservative Media, which features Fox, talk radio and a bunch of noisy partisans on the Internet and best-sellers list who almost never admit their side does anything wrong. (Liberals, by contrast, are always eating their own.) This solidarity came in handy when Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of *The Washington Post* began snooping around after the break-in at the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee. Once they scored a few scoops with the help of anonymous sources, Sean Hannity et al. went on a rampage. When the young reporters printed an article about grand jury testimony that turned out to be wrong, Drudge and the bloggers had a field day, even though none of them had lifted a finger to try to advance the story. After that, the Silent Majority wouldn't shut up.

Some argue the Watergate story died right there, but Nixon's attorney general wasn't taking any chances. Just as in the Valerie Plame case, the Justice Department subpoenaed Woodward and Bernstein to testify before the grand jury about their

“Watergate” hearings to keep the probe going. John Dean and other disgruntled former aides had no place to go.

For a while, I hoped that the Nixon tapes might bring some justice. But soon the tapes just became more fodder for those legal shows on cable. The Supreme Court split 5-4, along largely partisan lines, as it did in *Bush vs. Gore*. That allowed Nixon to keep control of the tapes. When he burned them, the bipartisan outcry you would have heard in the old days over destruction of evidence was muffled by a ferocious counterattack from the GOP's legion of spinners. A group calling itself “Watergate Burglars for Truth” set up a 527 to argue that Bill Clinton and other Democratic presidents had ordered more black-bag jobs than Nixon. There was nothing to prove them wrong.



With the GOP controlling Congress,
there'd be no Watergate hearings.

sources. When they declined, they were jailed for 18 months on contempt charges. Talkingpointsmemo.com and a few other liberal bloggers complained that it was hypocritical—top White House aides were suspected of shredding documents, suborning perjury and paying hush money to burglars—but to no avail. Public support for the media had hit rock bottom.

Whistle-blowers didn't fare much better. With Woodward and Bernstein out of business, the No. 2 man at the FBI, W. Mark Felt, held a press conference to air complaints that the White House and his own boss were impeding the FBI probe. Of course it was only a one-day story, with Ann Coulter predictably screaming that Felt was a “traitor.” Rush Limbaugh dubbed Felt “Special Agent Sour Grapes” because he'd been passed over for the top FBI job. Within hours, the media had moved on to the tale of a runaway bride. And because both houses of Congress are controlled by the GOP, there were no

Reports of a tape showing that Nixon directly ordered the cover-up were just rumors, not anything that could be posted on smokinggun.com.

Nixon gave a TV interview to the British journalist David Frost in which he said, “When the president does it, that means it's not illegal.” This explained why he felt comfortable approving the break-in at the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist. Ken Duberstein and a few other principled Republicans weighed in that Nixon was bad news, but they were drowned out by former aides like Pat Buchanan and G. Gordon Liddy, who wanted to firebomb the Brookings Institution. When “Firebombing Brookings: Good Idea or Not?” became the “Question of the Day” on MSNBC, Liddy's radio show got a nice ratings boost. After Ralph Reed disclosed that Nixon and Henry Kissinger had been on their knees praying in the Oval Office, Nixon went up 15 points in the Gallup, double among “people of faith.” Our long national nightmare was just beginning.