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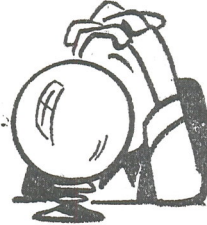
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# The Watergate Connection

**WHAT WILL ANOTHER GIBBON** say of our own times, when 200 years hence he chronicles the decline of the West? He is likely to conclude, as the first Gibbon did, that history is indeed "little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind."

Crimes, follies, and misfortunes! In the matter of Indochina, these are precisely the elements that have brought us to the bleak and bitter hour confronted by the President last Thursday night.



The crimes that figured so significantly in the last chapters of the story are the crimes that recently have been pushed to the back of our minds: the crimes of Watergate. It is curious that the Watergate connection has been so little recognized, but at a critical moment these were the crimes that influenced history.

The Paris peace accords, it will be recalled, finally were signed and announced toward the end of January, 1973. The first Watergate trials were just winding up. Richard Nixon was as yet untouched. Two and a half months earlier, he had won his triumphant re-election. With the Paris agreement and with the prospect of the troops' return from Vietnam, Nixon was sitting on top of the world.

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**BUT ALMOST IMMEDIATELY** — by mid-February — the North Vietnamese began to test the agreement. By early March, the Communists were moving troops and truck convoys toward the south in contemptuous violation of the accords. These troop movements were filmed, and the films were inspected at the highest levels in Washington.

As it transpired last week, Nixon had assured Saigon that he would "react vigorously" to North Vietnamese violations. Nixon met with his top military advisors. A decision was reached to resume saturation bombing for a limited period.

Meanwhile, on February 28, Nixon had engaged John Dean in an uneasy conversation. On March 13, Nixon, Dean, and H. R. Haldeman had talked even more anxiously of Watergate. On March 21, Dean cleared his throat: "In our conversation, uh, uh, I have, I have the impression that you don't know everything I know."

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**NIXON'S AUTHORITY**, which had seemed so untouchable, began to crumble. The bombing decision was postponed, then postponed again, finally abandoned. The moment for "vigorous reaction" passed, not ever to be regained. With increasing boldness, the Communists stepped up their violations. Congress in midsummer specifically prohibited military intervention in the name of enforcement.

In this sad register of history, the crimes of Watergate followed upon the follies of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. These blunders compounded the misfortunes of the South Vietnamese, who found themselves cursed with leaders incapable of leading. Deprived of American crutches, weakened by years of invasion, destruction, and bloodshed, the South Vietnamese now yield to panic and to despair.

Carlyle and Emerson saw history mainly as biography, and their view supplements Gibbon's. The lives of five or six men — Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Kissinger, and of course Ho Chi Minh and Nguyen-Van Thieu — made all the difference. Their character, temperament, and skill, their strengths and weaknesses, shaped the crimes, the follies, and the misfortunes.

This is history, written now in blood and tears. If we learn nothing from its lessons, in time we surely will take the lessons again.