

LAWRENCE MALKIN AND JOHN F. STACKS

WHAT IF WATERGATE WERE STILL JUST AN UPSCALE ADDRESS?

The very improbability of the events surrounding Watergate has a novelistic quality in its stretching of what we normally think of as the truth. The entire story, as narratives sometimes do, dangles on the slimmest of threads, or, in this case, a strip of tape. Suppose that, one late spring night in 1972, a security guard named Frank Wills, working the graveyard shift at the Watergate hotel-office complex in Washington, D.C., had not noticed something covering a door latch. That door opened on a stairwell leading up six flights to the Democratic National Committee headquarters and two years of national nightmare, which only ended with the resignation of the thirty-seventh president of the United States, Richard M. Nixon.

While we're at it, what if the White House, in the persons of the president's men, had not condoned covert operations by the Special Unit of the Committee to Re-Elect the President (the plumbers, as they were originally called when they worked out of the White House itself, because their mission was to plug leaks)? What if Nixon, always with an eye on the verdict of posterity, had not maintained a secret taping system, which would catch him in a clear obstruction of justice? He instructed the FBI not to pry into the Watergate break-in because, he claimed, it was a "national security" operation. His words were recorded. When the tapes were subpoenaed, he told a White

House staffer that he wanted them stored under his bed. The order was never carried out: it would have meant raising the ceiling of the presidential bedroom by some twenty feet.

Had it not been for Watergate, how might the history of America have played out in the last quarter of the twentieth century? That is the question that Lawrence Malkin and John F. Stacks address here.

In a counterfactual world, we would think of a better ending for the life of the late Frank Wills, the security guard who set Watergate in motion. After his brief moment in the limelight, he had trouble finding work: potential employers were afraid that they might draw down the wrath of the government. Eventually he returned home, penniless. He was arrested and convicted of shoplifting a pair of sneakers. He took care of his sick mother, the two of them living off her \$450 monthly Social Security check until she died. He couldn't afford to bury her, so he donated her body to science. No publisher ever offered him hundreds of thousands of dollars for his tell-all account. But then, doing right is not always that interesting.

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EARLY IN THE MORNING of June 17, 1972, five men led by James McCord, the security director of Richard Nixon's reelection campaign, were arrested in the Watergate office building in Washington, D.C. They were attempting to eavesdrop on the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee for the second time in three weeks, their first telephone taps having failed. They carefully taped open the basement garage doors, which the night watchman, Frank Wills, spotted and peeled away as he made his rounds, believing it might have been left there by a maintenance worker. When the watchman next came by and found the doors taped open again, he called his superiors, then the police.

Three plainclothes officers quickly responded to the burglary call. They were in a nearby bar having a drink after work, and unlike uniformed police, they traveled in an unmarked car. Thus they were able to surprise the burglars because no approaching siren warned them to scatter. But G. Gordon Liddy and E. Howard Hunt, who had planned the operation and were supervising it from the Howard Johnson Hotel across the street, fled in disarray. Although the burglars were wearing Playtex surgical rubber gloves, and McCord, Liddy, and Hunt had all previously been agents of the CIA or the FBI (in McCord's case, both), they left a trail of evidence that would shame even an amateur second-story man. Police found pen-sized tear gas guns, packets of consecutively numbered \$100 bills, and address books with Hunt's name and a White House telephone number.

At first the police and even *The Washington Post*, in the memorable phrase of Nixon's own spokesman, regarded the break-in as something



The tale of the tape: Frank Wills, right, the security guard who discovered the Watergate break-in, is interviewed by the media. But for his sharp eyes, the greatest political scandal of the twentieth century might have remained in the shadows. © Owen Franken/CORBIS

close to “a third-rate burglary.” The *Post*’s regular reporter at police headquarters funneled information to the newsroom. The raw details were passed to two ambitious young reporters on weekend duty, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. Woodward took it on himself to attend the arraignment of the burglars. To the judge’s routine question about their occupations, one proudly answered, “Anti-Communists.” The bemused magistrate persisted until he elicited a whispered admission from McCord that he had recently retired from the CIA. Woodward felt a reportorial rush of adrenaline. Even so, managing editor Howard Simons, a deliberative individual of great intelligence, refused to let the story lead the paper because, he warned, it could be the work of “crazy Cubans.” In fact, except for McCord, he was right: the other burglars were anti-Castro exiles.

It was Nixon himself who later provided the most damning evidence by secretly taping conversations with his most intimate advisers. The tapes confirm his own attempt to obstruct the investigation into the break-in. They record him personally approving hush money to the burglars and pressing the CIA to derail the FBI's investigation. This was the essence of the crimes that led to his forced resignation, but the very existence of these incriminating tapes tumbled out almost by accident during the ensuing congressional investigation.

If Watergate was Nixon's Waterloo, the emergence of the scandal that destroyed his presidency was, in the words of the Duke of Wellington, "a damned near-run thing, the damndest near-run thing you ever saw." This tenuous chain of evidence could have snapped at any point. What if it had? What if the thirty-seventh president had been re-elected by the greatest landslide in modern American history (as he was), but without this worst stain on his long-speckled reputation?

The post-Kennedy years would probably not be seen as a cynical age of failed presidencies extending from Lyndon Johnson and the Vietnam War to Jimmy Carter and the American hostages in Iran. There would have been no call for a permanent mechanism to appoint a special prosecutor, and probably few other attempts to make government more ethical. Perhaps most surprising of all, the United States would have some form of national health insurance. That is perhaps as good a place as any to start this bizarre story of what might have been.

From Nixon's first days as president, his house intellectual, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, persuaded him he could not lead the American imperium if it was based on a divided nation. Moynihan made Nixon a reader of the British historian Robert Blake's definitive biography of Benjamin Disraeli. Like Nixon, Disraeli was an outsider who turned his party into an incomparable vote-getting machine by playing an imperial game for the ruling classes and a reformist one for the workers at home. Nixon wanted to be "the architect of his times," according to Elliot Richardson, the Boston Brahmin in the cabinet of this California grocer's son.

Nixon first locked up Middle America through its patriotic support for the war in Vietnam and vitriolic attacks on its liberal opponents. He dared not squander it by producing anything less than "peace with honor." That was why the war dragged on until it finally ended in defeat after he was gone, and on terms he could have obtained during his first weeks in office. This helped him organize what his political acolytes called the Emerging Republican Majority of blue-collar Northerners, not-so-secret segregationists in the South, antibusing suburbanites, and Western libertarians who mistakenly took Nixon as antigovernment because he had made his name fighting Communists at home.

By 1970, Moynihan was drafting a bill mandating private health insurance with three-quarters of the premium to be paid by employers and government-paid insurance for those with very low or no incomes. There would have been maternity care for mothers and preventive care for children as well as catastrophic coverage; Nixon never forgot the cost of caring for his tubercular older brother. It was not perfect, but once a program so intimately connected with people's lives had been established, it would have taken root.

Health care was part of Nixon's 1971 State of the Union message, which was gearing up for his reelection campaign the next year. On the eve of that election, with the Democratic party self-destructing under the leadership of George McGovern, the president told the political writer Theodore White that although he had come into office with no domestic mandate, "now we've got an opportunity we couldn't even dream of four years ago." He never mentioned Watergate.

Was Nixon really serious, or was such domestic reform just another of his eponymous political tricks? The most scrupulous chronicler of his administration, the author and journalist Richard Reeves, believes that Nixon's "New Federalism" was essentially a sham because as president he was consumed by international affairs. But how could it have been otherwise? There was a war on—both hot and cold. Virtually every to-do list that this inveterate memo writer composed on yellow pads in his hideaway office touted his domestic programs with genuine pride.

He just didn't want to be bothered with them, although some of the important parts were enacted: sharing federal revenue with states and cities to relieve middle-class property taxpayers; environmental laws to clean up the mess left by heavy industry in the countryside used by hunters, fishermen, and family vacationers. Finally but most tragically, there was health-care reform.

Trying to deliver—too late—on his promises in February of 1974, he advanced an even more comprehensive health-insurance program as “an idea whose time has come.” Congressional cynics muttered that he was trying to divert attention from Watergate, but even the enhanced health plan was still not good enough for the leaders of the big industrial unions, whose members already had open-ended health insurance with no co-payments. Nor did it satisfy liberals who refused to compromise; they bet on obtaining a much more comprehensive bill from the veto-proof Congress that they expected out of a midterm Democratic sweep in November. But the health-insurance coalition was quickly dynamited apart by the usual suspects—small business on the right, I'm-all-right-Jack unions in the center, and liberal utopians on the left. A crippled president was unable to hold these normally feuding elements together, and after a constitutional crisis, his unelected successor, Gerald Ford, was preoccupied with healing the country rather than its individual citizens. In the end they all got nothing.

Health insurance could have been Nixon's crowning domestic accomplishment to match his historic achievement in foreign policy, America's belated opening to communist China. Winding down the Vietnam War and ending the draft had dampened dissent, or at least helped drive public alienation into a private world through controlled substances. Nixon's political mastery might also have softened the effects of the first OPEC oil shock, but as Watergate deepened, he could barely attend to such things. The 1973 Arab oil embargo was imposed on the same day as the Saturday Night Massacre; Solicitor General Robert Bork fired Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox on Nixon's orders after

Richardson and his deputy refused to dump his Harvard law professor and resigned.

And finally, had Nixon completed his second term unstained by Watergate, he might have handed on the solid Republican majority that he had set out to build. At the 1976 convention, Ronald Reagan, the darling of the Republican conservatives, would not have faced Ford as a sitting president and almost certainly would have won the nomination. Nixon would have engineered the vice presidential nomination of his favorite, the turncoat Democrat John Connally. He had entered politics as Lyndon Johnson's Texas sidekick and returned to Washington as Nixon's secretary of the treasury. But would Reagan have won an election as closely fought as Ford vs. Carter?

The message of the nationally unknown Georgia governor Jimmy Who—"I'll never lie to you"—was powerful stuff after two seasons of LBJ and Tricky Dick. He also ran as a Washington "outsider," a campaign that might have been less resonant if Nixon had been seen as a successful president. But if Nixon had served out his full term, he would have been in office when Saigon fell, perhaps after yet another spasm of fruitless B-52 raids on North Vietnam. The outgoing president and probably his party could have been blamed for wasting thousands of lives to achieve precisely nothing. But Connally would have snatched at least some of the South from Carter, and Reagan also would have campaigned against Washington. He would have presented his irrepressible optimism and a Hollywood actor's appearance of strength. This contrasting temperament would have promised relief from war and stagflation, upstaged an honorable scold such as Carter, and helped to eclipse Reagan's fearsome reputation as a Cold War Warrior and right-wing partisan.

It is simply impossible to know the outcome. But since Carter's four years were essentially an interregnum, it is intellectually intriguing to consider the possibilities of continued Republican governance. We already know that Carter's indecisive presidency contributed to the fear that the country was ungovernable. Under Reagan, the Nixon coalition

would have mutated much sooner into voters who were dubbed Reagan Democrats.

Although Reagan would have governed in difficult times, he would have railed against Arabs even as they raised oil prices, making Americans feel he was at least fighting back. He would have peddled the same supply-side economic nostrums of huge tax cuts. This vulgarized Keynesianism would probably have been better medicine than the zigzag economic management of both Ford and Carter. It would have been supported at the Federal Reserve by the sound-money policies of Paul Volcker. Although a Stevensonian Democrat, Volcker had served Nixon well as Connally's deputy by working out their strategy of devaluing the dollar and freezing prices and wages.

Entrusting Volcker with the Fed two years earlier than he actually got the job in 1979 would have been a great improvement over Carter's choice, the hapless businessman G. William Miller. When Reagan and Volcker finally did serve together, the president never got in the Fed chairman's way when he tightened money mercilessly to bring down double-digit inflation. Under a Reagan administration starting in 1977 instead of 1981, the Fed would have put the economy through the wringer sooner rather than later. Reagan's defense would have been to claim blithely but incorrectly that a million more people were at work and simply shrug it off when "some fellow out in South Succotash or somewhere gets laid off." These were his exact words in 1982 when unemployment rose to postwar highs.

Reagan's greatest challenge to a second term would have been posed by Iranian student radicals (assuming that like Carter he would have been conned by David Rockefeller into accepting the Shah of Iran in the United States for medical treatment, which was by no means certain). Reagan would have supported America's imprisoned diplomats in Tehran in the same way that Commander in Chief Teflon did after 241 Marines were killed by a suicide bomber in Lebanon in 1982. Instead of agonizing publicly over the hostages like Carter, Reagan and his image machine would have praised them as patriots for doing the duty for

which they had volunteered, never flinching and never bowing their heads, just as our pilots did in Vietnam until we brought them home, as we surely will from that den of evil in Tehran, etc.

By the time the economic revival came around in 1984, another Republican would have coasted into the White House (as Reagan did) on the theme of "Morning in America." It could have been Connally, who had a Texan's ability to leverage political eminence for financial gain and thus would have been spared his eventual fate as a footnote in American history: the only treasury secretary to die bankrupt. If Connally's aggressive nature turned off the voters, the indefatigably loyal and opportunistic Republican George Bush was always waiting in the wings, ready "to do whatever it takes" to win with the help of the Republican hit man Lee Atwater and the Bush family consigliere, James Baker.

Whatever Republican it was, the most lasting result of the Republican ascendancy would have been a Supreme Court tilted even more to the right, and smarter. Nixon would have had the opportunity to appoint a conservative clone of William Rehnquist, his last appointment in 1972, instead of the pragmatic jurist John Paul Stevens. He was Ford's only appointment, made in 1975 on the advice of Stevens's fellow Chicagoan, Attorney General Edward Levi, who had been brought in to clean up the Justice Department.

During Reagan's presidency, the radical conservative Robert Bork, unblemished by his role in Watergate, would have joined his ideological soul mate Antonin Scalia on the bench instead of causing an uproar that killed his nomination in the Senate. Reagan's successor would then have felt free to appoint yet another conservative instead of the low-profile David Souter, who made no waves in Congress but later drifted toward the Court's liberal wing.

The only imponderable is whether a two-term Republican, unable to run again in 1992, would have made such a naked grab for the black vote by nominating Clarence Thomas. Instead, he might have made a more subtle bid for Jewish campaign money by filling the Jewish

vacancy on the court with an intelligent moderate such as Leonard Garment. Alan Greenspan's political mentor and Nixon's former chief counsel, Garment also would have been unstained by the undiscovered Watergate.

But here our speculations must end, because a generation later it is impossible to separate the ripples of scandal from the stream of events. Any business-oriented Republican—and that was the only kind the party would tolerate—would have failed to confront the rise of globalization and the restructuring of American industry during the early 1990s (George Bush majored in economics at Yale and was still clueless). Saddam Hussein would still have grabbed Kuwait and forced America into the Gulf War, and the overwhelming American military victory would still have scared off most Democratic contenders except the dogged and indomitable Bill Clinton.

But a Nixon without Watergate would have permitted Clinton to take office without a health-care crisis. Clinton also would have been relieved of the pursuit by an institutionalized special prosecutor into his financial and sexual affairs. These two factors alone would have made his presidency different, although in what way it is only possible to say very narrowly.

History (although perhaps not the private life of Hillary Clinton) would have been spared the moonfaced Monica Lewinsky and her paramour's self-righteous nemesis, the special prosecutor Kenneth Starr. The travails of far more distinguished public servants would not have continued to stoke public suspicion of government. Victims ranged from Clinton's idealistic interior secretary Bruce Babbitt, who was caught in a political crossfire between rival Indian casino operators, to Reagan's Republican secretary of labor, Ray Donovan, who ruefully asked after being cleared of corruption, "Where do I go to get my reputation back?"

Well-intentioned post-Watergate laws to regulate campaign finance, avoid financial conflicts of interest, and punish misbehavior by politicians in office would not have been enacted, or at least not with such

reformist zeal as to encourage the exploitation of loopholes generating much public cynicism. The attack-dog Washington press, bred in the secret recesses of Credibility Gap during the Vietnam War, would have lacked some of the legitimacy it still claims from exposing the Watergate scandal.

The press exaggerated its own role in Watergate, even more in the movie version of *All the President's Men*. But reporters had to find something to make up for the public trust they had already lost by allowing themselves to be manipulated by Lyndon Johnson and Henry Kissinger. Despite triumphant claims, news about Watergate had little political impact until the official investigations began. More than half of Americans polled had never even heard of Watergate by election day, because very little of the worst "Watergate horrors" (the term coined by Nixon's attorney general, who later went to prison) had reached the public outside Washington.

Woodward and Bernstein had spent most of their time tracking secret Republican campaign funds; after most political and corporate crimes it is easier to establish a money trail, as prosecutors have known since Al Capone was jailed for income tax violations instead of murder. What the *Post* later claimed as its most glorious moment, it did not claim even on the day of Nixon's second inauguration. On January 20, 1973, its review of his first term did not mention Watergate. The case was cracked wide open shortly afterward by Judge "Maximum John" Sirica, a Republican former prosecutor with a streetwise Washington upbringing who threatened the Watergate burglars with decades of prison time unless they came clean. That led to the grand jury investigation that put the president's men in jail. Sirica forced the release of the White House tapes, and Senate hearings exposed the Watergate cover-up. What the media did then was simply report the official activity in full.

The identity of the *Post's* Deep Throat, the most famous anonymous source in the history of journalism, may never be disclosed. Before the

case came before Judge Sirica, *Time* magazine matched Woodstein nearly story for story (the *Post*, of course, publishes every day, and with more prominent headlines). *Time*'s sources lay in the career officials of the Justice Department, who had previously directed the magazine's investigative reporter, Sandy Smith, to stories about labor union and allied corruption. *The New York Times*, to the newspaper's undying chagrin, misread the story and virtually ignored it until after Nixon's reelection. Twenty years later, when a piddling real estate scandal fortuitously known as Whitewater was dredged up from Clinton's past, the *Times* led the pack.

On the thirtieth anniversary of the burglary, the *Post*'s great editor, Ben Bradlee, remarked that it was Watergate that "put us on the map." Otherwise the paper would probably be a prosperous provincial daily with must-read coverage of its dominant local industry, which happens to be the government of the United States. The *Post*'s Bob Woodward would probably also be only part of what he is now, a reporter with superb connections but not the nationally known Louella Parsons to the capital's chattering classes. In fact, government at all levels might have a little less celebrity and a little more honor, although that would be a near-run thing given the influence of television, the Internet, and the coarsening of public life that accompanied the dumbing down of American culture.

It was only a week before the Watergate burglary that George McGovern won the Democratic primary in California. His nomination was thus as assured as his defeat in the general election was certain, and the Watergate tapes show that a jubilant Nixon knew it. There is no evidence that Nixon knew any details of the Watergate burglary beforehand. If he had quickly denounced it and thrown McCord, Hunt, Liddy, and some of their superiors to the wolves, he would almost certainly have distanced himself from the scandal, and the air would have gone out of it. But it was in Nixon's nature to manipulate interest groups and

nations, whether friends or enemies, and divide them all—not least his enemies in the Democratic party, who could not unite behind a credible national candidate. This devious and manipulative man could not turn off the vindictive political machine of his own creation. Studious and even intellectual to the point of introversion—“This would be an easy job if you didn’t have to deal with people,” he once said—Nixon was to ordinary politics what antimatter is to the physical universe.

But even if Watergate had been overlooked, is it possible that this brilliant paranoid would have lasted another full term without some other politically fatal activity coming to light? Watergate was part of a pattern that may have been unstoppable—raiding the office of the psychiatrist of Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the Pentagon Papers; ordering a break-in at the liberal Brookings Institution; trying to underwrite the Southern segregationist George Wallace so his candidacy would split the Democratic vote. He obviously believed to the bitter end that he had done nothing wrong, for as he told the television interviewer David Frost in 1977, “When the President does it, that means it is not illegal.” If not Watergate, something like it was waiting to happen. History would then not have been that different after all, and we would still be kicking Dick Nixon around anyway.

If this is so—and who can ever know?—what we gain by the valuable intellectual exercise of turning history on its head can also be lost by ignoring another rule of the historian’s and indeed the dramatist’s art: that fate is character. This is a truth known to anyone familiar with Hamlet, the ur-character of our culture. Richard Nixon as Richard III, Lyndon Johnson as King Lear, or even Ronald Reagan as the wastrel Prince Hal metamorphosing into the peacemaking conqueror Henry V, are pictures that not only reflect real life but lodge so deeply in our imaginations as to help guide them. But then, few characters have been as influential as Richard Nixon in diverting the course of events into unpredictable channels, for good or ill.