

Jeani Sci

When Life Strikes  
the President

*Scandal, Death, and Illness  
in the White House*

**EDITED BY JEFFREY A. ENGEL**

AND

**THOMAS J. KNOCK**

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

© Oxford University Press 2017

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted by law, by license, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction rights organization. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.

You must not circulate this work in any other form  
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Engel, Jeffrey A., editor. | Knock, Thomas J., editor.

Title: When life strikes the president : scandal, death, and illness in the White House / edited by Jeffrey A. Engel and Thomas J. Knock.

Description: New York, NY : Oxford University Press, 2017. | Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016042216 (print) | LCCN 2017000855 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780190650759 (hardcover : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780190650766 (Updf) |

ISBN 9780190650773 (Epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Presidents—United States—Health—Case studies. |

Presidents--United States--Psychology—Case studies. | Presidents—United

States—Decision making—Case studies. | Political corruption—United

States—Case studies.

Classification: LCC E176.1 .W565 2017 (print) | LCC E176.1 (ebook) | DDC

973.09/9—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016042216>

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed by Sheridan Books, Inc., United States of America



President Nixon speaks at the Lincoln Memorial with Barbara Hirsch from Cleveland, Ohio, and Lauree Moss from Detroit, Michigan. Note the early morning fatigue on all the faces. Note also the civility of this unlikely encounter. [Photograph by Bettmann/Corbis.]

# A Depressed and Self-Destructive President

*Richard Nixon in the White House*

JEREMI SURI ■

One of the most bizarre moments in the history of the American presidency occurred in the early morning hours of May 9, 1970. During the course of three hours—beginning after 4:00am—an isolated, sleepless, and famously reclusive President Richard Nixon left the White House accompanied by his butler, doctor, and four perplexed Secret Service agents to visit the Lincoln Memorial. The beautiful monument stood illuminated against a dark sky, but it was filled with hundreds of angry young men and women who had traveled to Washington to protest the president's policies in Southeast Asia. The protesters came from cities and college campuses across the country, and hoped to “take back” the government from the “war mongers” whom they perceived controlled daily policies.<sup>1</sup>

Two years after the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, Nixon thus entered a potentially hostile setting without planning or preparation. He was exposed to immediate harm. He walked, largely unprotected, into a chamber filled with young people who hated him. This event never should have occurred. No one—including the president, his bodyguards, and the students—was prepared. In an era when

most political encounters are carefully stage managed, the serendipity of the Lincoln Memorial visit was almost unparalleled.<sup>2</sup>

A similar meeting will probably never occur again. And that is what makes the events of May 9, 1970, so revealing. The spontaneity of that moment provides a valuable window into the feelings, aspirations, and demons of a president who was besieged and vengeful but also desperate for support—or at least for some understanding—from his most vocal critics. Nixon acted out his fears and hopes that morning, without the filtering that typically accompanies the routines, the handlers, and the scripting of normal presidential behavior. The abnormality of the moment opens fascinating insights about what hides behind the daily appearance of rational policymaking. This observation is particularly true for Richard Nixon, whose anxieties and hatreds dominated his days in the White House.

A sense of crisis pervaded the Nixon presidency. He and his closest advisors felt attacked and mistreated from their first days in office, and this feeling only grew from year to year. The controversy surrounding the Vietnam War, which Nixon inherited from his predecessor, was a primary source of crisis. Domestic racial tensions, manifest in widespread urban violence, were another. Most of all, the crisis of the Nixon presidency grew out of his own personal depression. Nixon was deeply analytical, politically savvy, and driven to achieve big things for American society. He was also a troubled, insecure, and brooding man who often expected the worst and acted in ways that brought on those dreaded consequences. The political scandal known as Watergate, which ultimately eroded his presidency, was a result of Nixon's depression and so were other distortions of domestic and foreign policy.

President Nixon confronted a double-barreled set of challenges: a stalemated war in Vietnam and growing anger about the war at home. He entered the White House with a fragile ego and acute sensitivity to the insults he had long endured from leading figures in American society. Nixon blamed the political establishment, especially in the Democratic Party, for the failures and frustrations of the war. Public agreement with these criticisms helped to elect him president over his Democratic rival, Vice President Hubert Humphrey. Nixon's claims, however, exposed him

to even greater public condemnation, especially from his longtime political enemies, if he could not deliver immediate change in the war. This proved an insurmountable task for the new administration.<sup>3</sup>

During his presidential campaign in 1968, Nixon claimed to possess "secret plan" to end the Vietnam War and preserve the dignity of the United States. Just one year into his presidency, however, it became clear that he could not win the war, despite improved battlefield tactics by American military forces. At the same time, public manifestations of American anger with the war continued to grow. Americans disagreed on their preferred policies, but generally agreed that the conditions of the conflict were not improving, as soldiers continued to die, and the fighting and the bombing escalated. Nixon had to find a way to convince Americans that he was ending the war while preserving the dignity of the United States. He needed to negotiate enough to produce a settlement with North Vietnam but fight enough to show that Americans were still strong and determined to defeat communism.<sup>4</sup>

The weight of these challenges and Nixon's isolation from the public, partially self-imposed, contributed to the president's evident bouts of depression. Nixon functioned reasonably well in most public settings, but descended into self-pity, paranoia, and vengeance during private meetings and personal musings. His fears of his enemies multiplied, his sense of victimhood deepened, and his premonitions of failure grew. To escape his depression and restore hope, Nixon frequently lashed out at his advisers and adversaries alike. He valorized extraordinary, often illegal, behavior as a source of empowerment. He looked to "win big" because he feared losing it all very quickly. Nixon's depression infected all elements of his Vietnam policies, including his visit to the students at the Lincoln Memorial.

On the evening of April 30, 1970, President Nixon announced that American forces in South Vietnam were invading the neighboring country of Cambodia to interdict North Vietnamese supply lines. This announcement ignited convulsive protests on college campuses and in cities across the United States. Despite pledges by the administration to end the draft and limit American military deployments in Vietnam, young citizens feared the escalation meant they would have to participate in a pointless

but still deadly war.<sup>5</sup> They expressed an extreme and widely shared frustration with a conflict that was now expanding rather than diminishing as the new president had promised. Even the defenders of American anti-communist efforts in Southeast Asia, including Secretary of State William Rogers and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, doubted the wisdom of bringing yet another country into this terrible war.<sup>6</sup>

American society seemed to be coming apart. Antiwar demonstrations dominated public life in much of the country and often turned violent. After three years of rising public unrest against the Vietnam War—what Nixon called the “war at home”—the angry protests of early May 1970 marked a new, dangerous peak. On May 4, 1970, panicked National Guardsmen fired upon demonstrating students at Kent State University in Ohio, killing four of them, to the shock of the entire nation, including President Nixon. Eleven days later, this tragedy repeated itself when National Guardsmen again fired upon students, allegedly throwing rocks and bricks at police, from a dormitory at Jackson State College in Mississippi. Firing repeatedly into the building, the National Guardsmen killed two students and wounded twelve others.<sup>7</sup>

The images of armed soldiers occupying American college campuses, with dead young bodies lying on the ground, and horrified onlookers grieving over the deaths, circulated around the world. It seemed absurd that a conflict so far from the United States could spark such violence in Ohio and Mississippi, along with other parts of the country. Tens of thousands of American citizens—despite their political differences—demanded that the madness inspired by the Vietnam War must stop.<sup>8</sup>

Everyone had a different explanation, but no one doubted that American society had entered a new period of turmoil, greater even than the disruptions of 1968. Many universities shut down, canceling classes and end-of-year commencements. Others operated as war zones, with armed soldiers and police officers deployed around buildings and public gathering points. Nixon and his wife, Pat, had to cancel their planned attendance at the graduations of their daughter, Julie, from Smith College, and their son-in-law, David Eisenhower, from Amherst.<sup>9</sup>

These absences were personally painful for the Nixon family, and were symbolic of how hated and isolated the president had become. The announcement of America's invasion of Cambodia turned the vocal minority who despised Nixon into an apparent mass movement committed to his demise. The president accurately assessed the common enmity directed at him, especially from the nation's most educated citizens. Even if there was a "silent majority" of Nixon supporters, as the president claimed, the country's most prominent, articulate, and youthful figures disdained him. The majesty of the American presidency could not confer on Nixon the public respectability that he had craved for so long. Nixon revered President Dwight Eisenhower, under whom he had served as vice president, but recognized that he could never command the same authority among America's most influential elites. Nixon was a diminished president.<sup>10</sup>

The emotional toll on Nixon was evident to all who worked with him. He could not sleep. He was preoccupied. He displayed the dark and depressive elements of his personality that often appeared in moments of greatest stress.<sup>11</sup> As soldiers from the US Third Army entered Washington DC to control growing crowds of protesters in the wake of Cambodia and Kent State, the Secret Service parked empty buses around the White House to protect the building, and the most powerful man in the world showed signs of coming unhinged. His chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, commented in his diary that Nixon was dejected, tired, and terribly in need of rest. The president's national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, expressed similar sentiments, registering "deep concern" about Nixon's attitude and his health. Secretary of State William Rogers agreed with Kissinger, which was rare. Rogers and Kissinger both believed that Nixon needed relief from the extreme pressures of the office.<sup>12</sup>

As he often did in difficult moments, Nixon looked to acquaintances and staff for validation. (He had few real friends.) On the night of May 8, 1970, following a hostile press conference, he called more than fifty people to solicit praise and affirmation. He telephoned Henry Kissinger eight separate times. His calls continued beyond midnight and into the earliest hours of May 9. Then, after no more than two hours of sleep, the president



was awake again, on his way to the Lincoln Memorial. For a man who prided himself on his leadership experience and strategic planning, his actions displayed confusion and desperation.<sup>13</sup>

When he arrived at the Lincoln Memorial and encountered hundreds of young protestors camping out, Nixon did not know what to say. Neither did they. The president and his detractors viewed each other as mortal enemies, but they had always assumed a spatial distance that facilitated mutual vilification. Now, the mutual adversaries were real in-the-flesh human beings: scared, disoriented, and staring one another in the eyes. There was evident humanity in the awkward figure of Richard Nixon and in the innocence of the students that night. The moment was, nonetheless, deeply uncertain.

Nixon mumbled unintelligibly at times. He tried to convince the students that he shared their opposition to war. He argued that he was fighting to preserve American power so that the country could withdraw from Vietnam and avoid conflicts like that again. He claimed as well that he wanted to preserve American democracy, and sought to identify with the aspirations of young men and women.

The bleary-eyed students listened politely, by all accounts. They showed a sincere desire to hear the president. They also expressed disbelief about his main claims. They did not see any justification for expanding a terrible war; nor did they believe that the president was pursuing peace or that preserving existing American institutions was necessarily the right thing to do. The protesters at the Lincoln Memorial were not revolutionaries, but they had adopted a popular radical critique of American imperialism and an imperial presidency. They wanted to curtail the war-making power of the White House. Nothing Nixon said changed that.<sup>14</sup>

The president and the students were standing in the same space but operating in separate rhetorical universes. They were talking past one another. They were unable to find common meanings for shared references—particularly the Vietnam War—that provoked fundamentally different judgments. The students assumed the war was unjust, unnecessary, and irredeemable; Nixon believed the war was well intentioned, unavoidable, and worthy of redemption in a withdrawal without defeat.

These assumptions made their words incomprehensible to one another. The students could not understand why Nixon wanted to expand a self-defeating war; Nixon could not understand why the students did not see the value to the United States in standing up against foreign adversaries. Nixon and the students held different "faiths" about the war, and direct dialogue only clarified that divergence. There was little common ground for conversation. That was the central political and social divide of the era. Nixon could not accept his inability to change his listeners' opinions, even when they respectfully heard him out. He could not accept the power of the students' alternative understanding of the Vietnam War, American society, and his presidency.<sup>15</sup>

The political crisis that motivated Nixon's visit to the Lincoln Memorial became an even deeper personal crisis when he returned to his normal routine, knowing that his extraordinary act of outreach had produced no results other than to open him to further ridicule. Accounts of the incident made him sound desperate and confused, and they recorded a failure of persuasion. He did not sound or look like a strong commander-in-chief in his early morning discussion with the students.<sup>16</sup>

Nixon tried to turn the event into an exercise of statesmanship, but even his closest advisors could not accept that interpretation. In his private reflections, recorded four days later, the president criticized both the media's coverage and his own staff's understanding of this strange event. He complained to Haldeman that his advisors cared too much about "material things" and "what we accomplish in our record." They did not appreciate the "infinitely more important qualities of spirit, of emotion, of depth and mystery of life, which this whole visit was really all about."<sup>17</sup>

The events of May 9, 1970, were historically significant. Nixon was honest about that. What he tried to cover up, however, was how the inner motivations for his actions revealed his personal weaknesses and difficulties at a time of supreme stress. Nixon was in a psychologically unstable state, as most people around him recognized, and his erratic behavior (as well as his later efforts to disguise it) grew out of that personal condition. The visit was about *him*, not about the students or anyone else.

What did Nixon mean by the “qualities of spirit, of emotion, of depth and mystery of life” in his recorded reflections on his visit? Why did he travel at 4:30 a.m. to the Lincoln Memorial and talk so informally with his young detractors? He was not drunk, as some have alleged, and he was not deranged. He seemed fully functional, if a little disoriented, to all who interacted with him that strange morning. Did the president really think he could convince the young people he had met? Did he really believe that his visit would accomplish anything, other than endanger and subject himself to ridicule?

The most persuasive explanation for the events at the Lincoln Memorial and Nixon’s subsequent impulsive and self-destructive acts is that he suffered from intermittent but acute bouts of depression. When he felt helpless, as he did in early May 1970 (and in many other moments before and after) Nixon became convinced that the world was out to get him, with powerful forces committed to his failure. Even as president, he often perceived himself as a victim, as an outsider (from Whittier, California) suffering from unfair treatment by powerful insiders (Ivy League graduates, Jews, Kennedys, and Rockefellers). Nixon felt failure was almost unavoidable, he expressed self-pity, he lost sleep, and he pushed people away, including family and his wife, Pat. The protests of May 1970 imprisoned the president in the White House, and thus reinforced his own self-isolating tendencies in times of trouble.<sup>18</sup>

Nixon surrounded himself with other brooding figures—Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman, White House Counsel John Ehrlichman, and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, among others. They shared his sense of victimhood, and they endured his depressive and self-destructive moments. More than advisors, these men were facilitators, therapists, and protectors for the president when he fell into depressive moods. Each of them has described listening to the president’s diatribes and outlandish requests, pledging to follow his demands, and then waiting for him to calm down while stalling on any action. Thus they filtered his most dangerous tantrums.<sup>19</sup>

The peril, of course, was that Nixon’s demands often had serious consequences, especially when they involved his targeting of real and perceived

enemies. The wire-tappings, break-ins, and cover-ups that began in Nixon's first months in office, in 1969, were facilitated by Haldeman, Ehrlichman, Kissinger, and others. Nixon's depressive justifications for illegal activities against elites allegedly out to get him confirmed his advisors' own feelings of inadequacy. The president's angry requests often brought out the worst in his close, dependent circle.<sup>20</sup>

In February 1971 Nixon began taping his Oval Office conversations, primarily so he could remember the details of his discussions for current policy and posterity. He continued recording, with a voice-activated system, until July 1973. The Nixon tapes, including also many of his telephone conversations, are particularly insightful because they penetrate the public image of banal stability that Nixon had created to hide his personal demons. On the tapes he frequently becomes unhinged, issuing rambling tirades about critics and self-justifying soliloquies about his "toughness," his "will," and his "balls." Nixon repeatedly seeks validation from his advisors, but he never gets enough. The more they praise him, the more of it he demands. His efforts to gain validation only reinforce his feelings of inferiority and his lonely isolation.<sup>21</sup>

The tapes recount more than just stray salacious comments that Nixon's defenders want to dismiss. The tapes show a powerful man paralyzed by a self-defeating personality. The pattern of rhetoric and rant is one of a man who is filled with hate and self-doubt, and scared of hostile forces. There is almost no optimism, little self-confidence, and never any grace about his detractors. The portrait of Nixon on the tapes is not just the president against the world, but the world closing-in on the president who must fight to forestall his nightmares.

As the evidence of presidential involvement with the June 17, 1972 break-in at Democratic Party headquarters in the Watergate office complex mounted, Nixon's comments on May 11, 1973, to his press secretary, Ron Ziegler, were hardly unique:

NIXON: Ron, let's be quite candid [about] the media or the left . . . Don't you really think that what they're trying to do is to destroy not so much the [Administration?] but what I stand for?

ZIEGLER: They would be—from their standpoint, their motive. . .

NIXON: Is destruction.

NIXON: Every campaign they've opposed. Well, in any event, if that is the case, isn't that what the larger battle is about? The larger battle is really we're just trying to kill the President. [Loud exhale.] That's very, very tough. That's what we must not let them do.<sup>22</sup>

These words, repeated in similar forms on countless occasions in the Nixon tapes, are the ruminations of a powerful man who is filled with rage about his perceived victimization. Nixon repeatedly calls upon his aides to use all their resources to “fix” his adversaries so they can never threaten him again:

NIXON: Espionage and Sabotage. Do you understand? That's the point that I'm making . . . [E]spionage and sabotage is illegal only if against the government. Hell, you can espionage and sabotage all you want, unless you use illegal means . . . Can I get away with it?

JOHN DEAN: “I don't think we'll get away with it forever.”<sup>23</sup>

John Dean served as legal counsel to the president, and Nixon anticipated his answer. The president believed he was the victim of abuse and attack from all directions, but he also understood that his defenses were extreme, illegal, and ultimately self-defeating. That was the fundamental root of his depression. He had to fight to save himself and he knew that he could not win because his fighting would elicit more attacks from those who sought to destroy him. Nixon felt trapped in a spiral he could not escape. He was self-righteous, but he was also deeply pessimistic about his options. He saw himself stuck in a corner from which he lashed out and dug in for a long winless struggle.<sup>24</sup>

Careful to conceal this private darkness, Nixon made it a point to limit his public appearances as much as possible. He claimed his isolation was a choice to maximize his opportunities for “big” thinking, but the taped conversations reveal few strategic reflections or deep policy analyses. The

same is true for his frequent memos to staff. The president's dialogues with Haldeman, Ehrlichman, and Kissinger focused overwhelmingly on personal politics: who was against the administration, and who was trying to hurt them. The president and his advisors spent most of their time together brooding about their vulnerabilities and plotting to take action. They wanted, in Nixon's words, to "get out front," "to hit them hard" before suffering additional blows. There was no distinction between high policy and personal politics for the Nixon administration.<sup>25</sup>

There was also no break between the president's national goals and his individual vendettas. Nixon's depression empowered his advisors to break the rules of civility and democracy. He encouraged this atmosphere in the White House when he charged his staff, following the release of the "Pentagon Papers," the Department of Defense history of the Vietnam War: "You can't fight this with gentlemanly gloves."<sup>26</sup>

Calling on his advisors to use the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) as a mechanism for pressuring and discrediting adversaries, Nixon made his intentions clear:

We have all this power and we aren't using it. Now, what the Christ is the matter? . . . You've got the facts. Did they check the other side of the facts? What is being done? Who is doing this full-time? That's what I'd like to know. Who is running IRS? Who is running over at Justice Department?<sup>27</sup>

The insecure and hyper-aggressive atmosphere created by the president within his inner circle encouraged ever-escalating attacks on detractors. This began in the first months of the new administration. The lead came directly from the president who demanded the destruction of his enemies in the State Department, the Defense Department, and other parts of government.<sup>28</sup>

In March 1969 Nixon formed a personal White House intelligence group, acting outside the purview of Congress, the courts, the FBI, and the CIA. He had no statutory or constitutional basis for this radical extension of presidential power, which he hid from all but his closest advisors. On the

president's order, White House Counsel John Ehrlichman hired New York City police detective John Caulfield to investigate Nixon's critics. Caulfield was officially a "liaison" with federal law enforcement agencies. He hired an assistant named Anthony Ulasewicz, also from New York. Ulasewicz was paid illegally from contributions left over after the 1968 presidential campaign.<sup>29</sup>

Forming a personal intelligence office in the White House was one of the president's first priorities; adhering to the rule of law and basic ethical principles was not. Nixon began his presidency by devoting his time and energy to activities that did not contribute to productive policymaking. He created, at the center of his administration, a group of illegal actors. He also set a tone of illegality, or at least cavalier disregard for the law, among those closest to him. Nixon was smart enough to understand the dangers, but he could not keep his fears and animosities under control.<sup>30</sup>

The president's personal intelligence office and its rag-tag group of zealots and mercenaries became known as "The Plumbers" for their use of a basement space in the Executive Office Building, next to the White House. Nixon ordered the Plumbers to wiretap a large roster of State Department, National Security Council, and Defense Department figures whom he accused of leaking information critical of the White House. His advisors also initiated a series of wiretaps on newspaper reporters who printed negative stories about the administration. Beyond the media, the Plumbers collected information on domestic critics, civil rights activists, and other groups deemed threatening to the president's policies, especially the conduct of the war in Vietnam. Covert efforts to undermine critics and harass their families followed from the collection of information.<sup>31</sup>

The White House flaunted laws protecting privacy and due process. National security concerns were a false rationalization for what were almost exclusively personal and political considerations. In 1971 Daniel Ellsberg's release of the Pentagon Papers, which detailed earlier administration's rationales for engaging in Southeast Asia, elicited more of the patterned behavior that had begun around the president months before. The Nixon tapes are filled with the president's obsessive condemnations of

Ellsberg and his supporters, especially the editors of the *New York Times*, who courageously published the secret documents.

On June 29, 1971, for instance, Nixon told his aide, Charles Colson, to “get him [Ellsberg] tied in with some communist groups.” The next day Nixon demanded that Attorney General John Mitchell and Henry Kissinger “get everything out. Try him in the press. Everything, John, that there is on the investigation, get it out, leak it out. We want to destroy him [Ellsberg] in the press. Press. Is that clear?”<sup>32</sup>

The president followed up these vengeful comments with orders for his aides to slander and discredit Ellsberg, his supporters, the *New York Times*, and other mainstream media. By the summer of 1971 the Plumbers were already actively undermining democratic rule of law, following the explicit instructions of an unhinged president. Nixon created an early and enduring pattern of executive aggression without legal limits.

The president felt threatened by the critical treatment of the Vietnam War, even though the Pentagon Papers focused on US policies before 1969. Nixon perceived a conspiracy against him. He feared that his enemies would, once again, circle together to bring him down. In anticipation of this outcome, he mobilized the Plumbers and others to break into the offices of Ellsberg’s psychiatrist, the Brookings Institution, the RAND Corporation, and the Council on Foreign Relations to gather information that might discredit opponents of the Vietnam War. Nixon repeatedly made it clear in taped conversations that he would stop at nothing to undermine those who attacked him.<sup>33</sup>

The same pattern of behavior motivated the incompetent break-ins by Nixon administration operatives at Democratic Party offices, on June 17, 1972. This was the infamous Watergate incident, named for the large multiuse building complex in Washington DC where it occurred. The break-in was poorly planned, but it fit the logic of White House behavior since 1969. The Nixon tapes show that the effort to obtain damaging information about opponents had become standard operating procedure for the staff of a president who always feared the worst of his enemies. The Nixon tapes also show without a doubt that the president knew about the break-in soon after it occurred.<sup>34</sup> Nixon acted consistently, often desperately, to



cover-up his involvement. The more he tried to erase his tracks, divert attention, and minimize the misdeeds, the more critical scrutiny he faced. The cover-up exposed the president in ways that deepened his depressive moods and furthered his urge to lash out.

Nixon tried to imagine that the public would rally to him, but his explanations rang hollow, even to his own ears. On June 21, 1972, just four days after the Watergate break-in, he acknowledged his guilt and expressed empty hopes that exposed his cornered position:

My view is, and I still hold with this view, that in terms of the reaction of people, the reaction is going to be primarily Washington and not the country, because I think the country doesn't give much of a shit about it other than the ones we've already bugged. Now, somebody else, you see—now, everybody around here is all mortified by it. It is a horrible thing to rebut. And the answer of course is that most people around the country think that this is routine, that everybody's trying to bug everybody else, it's politics. That's my view. The purists probably won't agree with that, but I don't think they're going to see a great uproar in the country about the Republican committee trying to bug the Democratic headquarters.<sup>35</sup>

Pushed by his own staff about his tortured logic and unlikely diminishment of the crime, Nixon tried again to convince himself and others that the damage could be ignored:

Look, breaking and entering and so forth, without accomplishing it, is not a hell of a lot of crime. The point is that this is not—that only thing I'd say if somebody was going to ask me about, do you agree with [Press Secretary Ron] Ziegler's cut calling it a third-rate burglary, I'd say: No, I disagree, it was a third-rate *attempted* burglary.<sup>36</sup>

The president used his personal intelligence staff to set up a series of denials, prevarications, and diversions, but all of these actions only drew more attention to the crime and the responsibility of the White House.

Like other depressed people, Nixon found that his efforts to conceal his vulnerability only contributed to greater exposure. He could not come clean about his misdeeds—as he should have for self-preservation—because of the larger pattern of illegal White House behavior. Confession to the Watergate break-in would reveal greater crimes that multiplied with each passing day and each effort at a cover-up.

More fundamentally, Nixon could not come clean because he feared showing weakness and vulnerability to his enemies. He anticipated that an admission of mistake would open a wound that his detractors would exploit to bleed him to death. The president tried desperately to reinforce his armor, as the body of his administration rapidly decayed from what an aid aptly called a “cancer” of illegal behavior.<sup>37</sup>

The most striking element of the Watergate scandal is not only how unnecessary it was but also how dark and brooding the president became with each passing month. At every step, he feared the worst from any admission of error. At every step, he saw himself as more of a victim, attacked by those who, in his mind, had done similar things. Nixon recognized that he had broken the law, but he did not believe that someone with all of his disadvantages had to abide by the law. He had suffered, and he had been excluded. He had been disrespected by the high and mighty. Why did he have to play by rules that benefited them? Why did he have to accept a history that made him a loser, even when he was president?

Nixon's struggles with his personal demons also distorted his foreign policy, despite his stunning victories of 1972, especially the opening to China and the negotiation of the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) with the Soviet Union. Public revelations about the Watergate break-in and the president's continuing efforts to cover up his role occupied more and more of his attention. The topic begins to dominate the discussions in the Nixon tapes by early 1973.

Nixon's distrust of traditional elites and his conspiratorial inclinations led him to hold tight personal authority over the key elements of his foreign policy. He gave unprecedented power to Special Assistant for National Security Affairs Henry Kissinger, who often carried out the president's policies without informing the secretary of state, the secretary of

defense, or members of Congress. This arrangement helped to preserve secrecy and decrease bureaucratic hurdles to policy change, but it also created a strange co-dependency and isolation. Nixon mixed strategic and emotional considerations in his policy orders, and Kissinger struggled to make sense of the president's inclinations. Kissinger also quickly learned to manipulate Nixon's emotions, especially in his depressed moments.<sup>38</sup>

The first example of this dynamic occurred in October 1969, when the president demanded that Kissinger find a way to frighten the Soviet leadership into offering him assistance in procuring a favorable settlement to the Vietnam War. Nixon called this his "madman" strategy; it was based on the proposition that the adversary will give in to a leader who appears unhinged and dangerous. Kissinger ominously told Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin: "the train had just left the station and was now headed down the track."<sup>39</sup>

To put evidence behind these warnings, Kissinger designed a bluff that would satisfy the president's "madman" pretensions, signal seriousness to the Soviet Union, and keep the entire matter secret from the American people. During the second half of October 1969, the United States went on alert, sending nuclear-armed B-52 aircraft on eighteen-hour missions over the northern polar ice cap, toward Soviet territory. This was a simulated nuclear strike. The alert extended to Strategic Air Command bombers and Polaris nuclear-armed submarines, all of which adopted communications silence and increased readiness for battle.<sup>40</sup>

The Soviet Union surely noticed these threatening maneuvers, and the American public did not learn of them as planned. There is little evidence that anything else went as Nixon and Kissinger expected. The Soviets never responded to the nuclear alert with assistance in Vietnam, and American military leaders did all they could to counteract the president's orders. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird and his subordinates believed that the White House was acting in reckless ways that could endanger the entire world—and with little to gain. Laird was, of course, correct.<sup>41</sup>

This pattern repeated itself almost exactly four years later in the days after the October 6, 1973 Egyptian and Syrian attacks on Israel. Nixon

and Kissinger worked to broker a cease-fire and then a peace settlement for a war that had almost destroyed the Jewish state. American leaders sought to make the United States the dominant power in the region, excluding the Soviet Union from the influence it had previously exercised through Cairo, Damascus, and other Arab capitals. On October 24, when Moscow threatened to send its own forces to the region, Nixon and Kissinger decided once again that they needed to display overwhelming strength, and some "madman" characteristics, to deter Soviet intervention. Kissinger anticipated this response a few months earlier when he explained to Israeli Ambassador Yitzhak Rabin: "I have learned that when you use force it is better to use 30 percent more than is necessary than five percent less than necessary . . . whenever we use force we have to do it slightly hysterically."<sup>42</sup>

On the night of October 24, 1973, the United States initiated a new nuclear alert, raising the status of its forces to "Defcon III," the state of readiness perilously close to actual nuclear war. When questioned, Kissinger spoke explicitly of the threat to regional stability:

The United States does not favor and will not approve the sending of a joint Soviet-United States force into the Middle East. . . . The United States is even more opposed to the unilateral introduction by any great power, especially by any nuclear power, of military forces into the Middle East in whatever guise those forces should be introduced.<sup>43</sup>

This time American actions might have deterred the Soviet Union, but they also created grave international concerns about American overreaction. Unlike the alert in 1969, the "Defcon III" decision immediately became public. The president and his closest advisors never considered the panic their actions would create. Remarkably, Nixon missed the meeting that initiated the alert. Kissinger made the decision with Alexander Haig, then White House chief of staff. "You cannot be sure how much of this is due to our domestic crisis," Kissinger told Haig. "I don't think [the Soviets] would have taken on a functioning president." Nixon's incapacity

and distraction on 24 October 1973 were driven by his preoccupation with Watergate.<sup>44</sup>

On October 25 Kissinger and Haig discussed the alert and its aftermath with the clear understanding that they, not the president, had made the key decisions:

KISSINGER: You and I were the only ones for it. These other guys were wailing all over the place this morning.

HAIG: You're telling me. Last night it seemed like someone had taken their shoes away from them. You really handled that thing magnificently.

KISSINGER: I think I did some good for the President.

HAIG: More than you know.<sup>45</sup>

Kissinger then called Nixon, who was focused on his domestic "enemies" rather than the dangers overseas. The president's personal demons clearly detracted from his ability to manage a major international crisis. He empowered his chief foreign policy advisor, by default, to make decisions that involved the most dangerous weapons in the world. This was a reprehensible departure from the constitutional expectations of the nation's commander-in-chief.

This analysis of a distracted and sometime depressed president brings us back to the Lincoln Memorial in the early morning hours of May 9, 1970. Nixon arrived there neither to condemn nor to persuade his young opponents camping out to protest his invasion of Cambodia. Besieged by his critics at home and stymied in his efforts to find a path to victory in Vietnam, Nixon had a sleepless night of depression. He reached out to the image of Lincoln and the students gathered around the monument as a plea for help. Like other people suffering from depression, he wanted a way out. He wanted to find solace, security, and friendship. He wanted to feel like everything was going to be all right. He looked desperately to the Lincoln Memorial that morning, hoping that setting would give him the emotional sustenance he needed.

It never did. His depression deepened in the coming months and recurred more frequently as circumstances at home and abroad worsened. Even a decisive reelection in November 1972 could not stop the pain. Nixon felt himself sinking. As he punched at those whom he feared were pushing him under the water, he only gave them more ammunition to hasten his drowning. Depression bred hatred and illegality, which made the most powerful man in the world a sobbing wreck, forced from the office he had struggled so hard to attain.

When Nixon reached out to the protesting students on May 9, 1970, he was trying to halt his slide. It was one of the most sincere moments of his presidency. It was also one of the most tragic . . . and depressing.

## NOTES

1. For accounts of the ubiquitous public protests and controversial foreign policy decisions in this era, see Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Martin Klimke, *The Other Alliance: Student Protest in West Germany and the United States in the Global Sixties* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Niall Ferguson, Charles S. Maier, Erez Manela, and Daniel J. Sargent, eds., *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).
2. For an excellent discussion of President Nixon's visit to the Lincoln Memorial on May 9, 1970, and new evidence about this strange moment and its deeper meanings, see the PBS News Hour interview with Professor Melvin Small on November 25, 2011: <http://video.pbs.org/video/2170891424> (accessed 13 May 2014). See also Melvin Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1999), 218; Anthony Summers, *The Arrogance of Power: The Secret World of Richard Nixon* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 364–66; Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 203–04; Tom McNichol, "I Am Not a Kook: Richard Nixon's Bizarre Visit to the Lincoln Memorial," *Atlantic*, November 14, 2011: <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2011/11/i-am-not-a-kook-richard-nixons-bizarre-visit-to-the-lincoln-memorial/248443> (accessed 13 May 2014).
3. Among the many books on this topic, see Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998); Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008).

4. On the 1968 election and its legacies, see Lewis Gould, 1968: *The Election that Changed America*, 2nd ed., (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2010). Walter LaFeber, *The Deadly Bet: LBJ, Vietnam, and the 1968 Election* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005).
5. The US military officially became an all-volunteer force in July 1973, ending a long history of mandatory conscription of citizens in times of war and national emergency. See Beth Bailey, *America's Army: Making the All-Volunteer Force* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009); Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).
6. On this point, see William Bundy, *A Tangled Web: The Making of Foreign Policy in the Nixon Presidency* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998); Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, esp. 177–248; Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).
7. See Tim Spofford, *Lynch Street: The May 1970 Slayings at Jackson State College* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1989); Christine M. Lamberson, "In the Crucible of Violence: The Remaking of American Political Culture in the 1960s and 1970s," Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2012.
8. On the events surrounding the US invasion of Cambodia and the public protests in the United States, see John M. Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign: The 1970 Offensive and America's Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005); William Shawcross, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon, and the Destruction of Cambodia* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979); Tom Wells, *The War Within: America's Battle Over Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Jeremy Varon, *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004).
9. See Will Swift, *Pat and Dick: The Nixons, an Intimate Portrait of a Marriage* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), 249–50.
10. *Ibid.*, 257–58. On the "silent majority," see Perlstein, *Nixonland*; Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Michael W. Flamm, *Law and Order: Street Crime, Civil Unrest, and the Crisis of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). On the relationship between Eisenhower and Nixon, see John W. Malsberger, *The General and the Politician: Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, and American Politics* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014).
11. For a sympathetic, poignant portrait of Nixon's inner demons, see Tom Wicker, *One of Us: Richard Nixon and the American Dream* (New York: Random House, 1995). See also Elizabeth Drew, *Richard M. Nixon* (New York: Henry Holt, 2007).
12. See H. R. Haldeman diary entries, 9–11 May 1970, in H. R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1994), 195–97; Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 509–17, quotation on 514; Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 200, 205–44.
13. See Keith W. Olson, *Watergate: The Presidential Scandal that Shook America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 14–16.
14. See note 1.

15. This description of Nixon's visit to the Lincoln Memorial and his discussions with students comes from a variety of accounts, especially those in endnote 2. See also Nixon's personal reflections, recorded on a dictabelt on 13 May 1970: <http://www.nixonlibrary.gov/virtuallibrary/recordings/dictabelts.php>.
16. See the widely read accounts of Nixon's unsteady policy-making, and his early morning visit to the Lincoln Memorial, in Max Frankel, "Nixon: He Faces a Divided, Anguished Nation," *New York Times* (10 May 1970), 157; Tom Wicker, "In the Nation: Getting Through to the President," *New York Times* (10 May 1970), 173.
17. See Nixon's May 13, 1970, reflections on his visit to the Lincoln Memorial a few days earlier: <http://www.nixonlibrary.gov/virtuallibrary/recordings/dictabelts.php>.
18. See Swift, *Pat and Dick*, esp. 243–65; Stanley I. Kutler, *The Wars of Watergate: The Last Crisis of Richard Nixon* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 77–125.
19. See Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), 73–74, 1182; H. R. Haldeman diary entry, 24 April 1970, in *Haldeman Diaries*, 184–85.
20. See Kutler, *The Wars of Watergate*, 77–125, 161–84.
21. The fullest and most accessible collection of the Nixon tapes is available at <http://nixon tapes.org>. This website is largely the result of extraordinary efforts by Dr. Luke Nichter. The Nixon tapes include approximately 3,700 hours of phone calls and meetings that President Nixon secretly recorded between February 1971 and July 1973. The National Archives has released approximately 2,300 hours of the tapes so far. For two sets of published transcripts from Nixon tape selections, especially regarding Watergate, see Stanley I. Kutler, *Abuse of Power: The New Nixon Tapes* (New York: Free Press, 1997); Douglas Brinkley and Luke Nichter, *The Nixon Tapes: 1971-1972* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2014).
22. Audio Recording of President Nixon with Press Secretary Ron Ziegler, May 11, 1973, 8:27 a.m., Oval Office, transcribed in Kutler, *Abuse of Power*, 452–53.
23. Audio Recording of President Nixon with John W. Dean III, Counsel to the President, March 14, 1973, 9:50 a.m., Executive Office Building, transcribed in Kutler, *Abuse of Power*, 229.
24. See Dean's detailed and personal account in his book, *The Nixon Defense: What He Knew and When He Knew It* (New York: Viking, 2014).
25. This point comes through in a number of the memoirs, including those from advisors who remained favorably inclined to Nixon as a leader. See, for example: H.R. Haldeman with Joseph DiMona, *The Ends of Power* (New York: Times Books, 1977); William Safire, *Before the Fall: An Inside View of the Pre-Watergate White House* (New York: Tower Books, 1975); David Gergen, *Eyewitness to Power: The Essence of Leadership, Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Touchstone Books, 2000), 19–104. See also Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*. See also Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 201–11.
26. Audio Recording of President Nixon with H. R. Haldeman and Henry Kissinger, July 1, 1971, 8:45 a.m., Oval Office, transcribed in Kutler, *Abuse of Power*, 9. On the history of the Pentagon Papers and the political controversy surrounding their release by the *New York Times*, see David Rudenstine, *The Day the Presses Stopped: A History of the Pentagon Papers Case* (Berkeley: University of



- California Press, 1996); James C. Goodale, *Fighting for the Press: The Inside Story of the Pentagon Papers and Other Battles* (New York: CUNY Journalism Press, 2013); Daniel Ellsberg, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers* (New York: Penguin, 2002).
27. Audio Recording of President Nixon with H.R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, 3 August 1972, 9:44 a.m., Oval Office, transcribed in Kutler, *Abuse of Power*, 112–13.
  28. See Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, esp. 89–103; Kutler, *Wars of Watergate*, 94–96.
  29. See Olson, *Watergate*, 5–21.
  30. Stanley Kutler describes the “Huston Plan,” designed to allow the president the ability to spy on domestic critics of the administration. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover opposed the scheme because it circumvented his agency, and he effectively killed it. Kutler shows that Nixon continued to pursue this secret domestic surveillance capability through various White House intelligence operatives. The “Huston Plan” was a model for the White House “plumbers.” See Kutler, *Wars of Watergate*, 96–101.
  31. *Ibid.*, 102–25; Olson, *Watergate*, 18–21.
  32. Audio Recording of President Nixon with Charles Colson, June 29, 1971, 2:28 p.m., White House Telephone; Audio Recording of President Nixon with John Mitchell and Henry Kissinger, June 30, 1971, 2:55 p.m., Oval Office, transcribed in Kutler, *Abuse of Power*, 6.
  33. See Kutler, *Wars of Watergate*, 161–84.
  34. These points about a pattern of Nixon administration behavior and the president’s knowledge of the break-in are central to the two best books on the topic: Kutler, *Wars of Watergate* and Olson, *Watergate*. See the evidence from the Nixon tapes in Kutler, *Abuse of Power*, especially 43–185.
  35. Audio Recording of President Nixon with H.R. Haldeman and Charles Colson, June 21, 1972, 9:30 a.m., Oval Office, transcribed in Kutler, *Abuse of Power*, 54.
  36. *Ibid.*, 55.
  37. This was the phrase used by John Dean on March 21, 1973. See Audio Recording of President Nixon with H. R. Haldeman and John Dean, March 21, 1973, 10:12 a.m., Oval Office, transcribed in Kutler, *Abuse of Power*, 247. In this remarkable meeting Dean outlines for the president the details of the Watergate break-in, the White House connection, and the subsequent White House cover-up. Nixon listens and then pledges to continue the cover-up, soliciting more money to pay off those who might reveal information incriminating the president. See also Dean’s *The Nixon Defense*.
  38. See Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century*, 201–11; Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 89–103.
  39. Memorandum of Conversation between Kissinger and Dobrynin 27 September 1969, Folder: Dobrynin/Kissinger 1969 [Part 1], Box 489, Henry Kissinger Office Files, NSC files, Richard M. Nixon Papers, Richard Nixon Presidential Library, Yorba Linda, California [hereafter Nixon papers]. See also Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century*, 216–18; Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*,

- 63–86; idem., ed., *The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon-Era Strategy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 11–24, 53–120.
40. See Jeremi Suri, “The Nukes of October: Richard Nixon’s Secret Plan to Bring Peace to Vietnam,” *Wired Magazine* 16 (October 2008); William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball, “Nixon’s Secret Nuclear Alert: Vietnam War Diplomacy and the Joint Chiefs of Staff Readiness Test, October 1969,” *Cold War History* 3 (January 2003), 113–56.
  41. See Scott D. Sagan and Jeremi Suri, “The Madman Nuclear Alert: Secrecy, Signaling, and Safety in October 1969,” *International Security* 27 (Spring 2003), 150–83.
  42. Memorandum of Conversation between Kissinger, Rabin, and Peter Rodman, January 24, 1973, Folder: Rabin/Dinitz, Sensitive Memcons, 1973 [2 of 2], Box 135, Kissinger Office Files, Nixon papers.
  43. Quoted in Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 594–95.
  44. See transcript of telephone conversation between Kissinger and Haig, October 24, 1973, 10:20 p.m., available through the U.S. Department of State’s Freedom of Information Act website: <http://foia.state.gov/SearchColls/CollsSearch.asp> [hereafter FOIA]; Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 585–88.
  45. See transcript of telephone conversation between Kissinger and Haig, October 25, 1973, 2:35 p.m.; transcript of telephone conversation between Kissinger and Nixon, October 25, 1973, 3:05 p.m., State FOIA.