



A Curriculum Guide to:

Conspiracy: Nixon, Watergate, and Democracy's Defenders

By P. O'Connell Pearson

About the Book

Richard Nixon reached the pinnacle of a long political career when he won a second term as president with a remarkable landslide victory in November 1972, winning forty-nine of the fifty states. It was the kind of approval he had longed for all his life. Less than two years later, however, he resigned the presidency—the first president to do so—rather than face an inevitable impeachment in the House of Representatives and conviction in the Senate. Americans heaved a collective sigh of relief that Nixon had gone peacefully and that the constitutional crisis known as Watergate was over.

Nixon's slide into disgrace began after a June 1972 bungled break-in at the Watergate Office Complex in Washington uncovered a mountain of corruption, crime, and abuse of power in the

Oval Office. Over the next two years, Americans learned that the president of the United States had turned his back on the Constitution and on them. They cheered the constitutional system that had worked to save the American republic.

Conspiracy is the story of *why* that system worked and the people who *made* that system work—democracy’s defenders. The reporters, prosecutors, judges, justices, members of Congress, civil servants, and the public who supported and defended the Constitution in a time of crisis became quiet heroes. The Watergate story and their part in it is both a history lesson from the past and a civics lesson for today.

Prereading Activity

In groups or as a class, have students share) what they know about the three branches of government in the United States.

- A. What are the three branches of government?
- B. What duties does each branch have?
- C. Why did the framers of the Constitution (the men who wrote it) divide power among three branches of government?

Discussion Questions

(The following questions correlate to Common Core Standards
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.1; RH.6-8.2; RH.6-8.3; RH.6-8.4; 6-8.6)

Students can answer these questions while reading, or the questions can be divided and discussed in small groups

Chapter 1—Landslide

- 1. What kinds of tactics did Richard Nixon and his men use to win the 1972 election?
- 2. Why did President Nixon keep many of his plans for his second term secret?
- 3. Read the presidential oath that begins with “I do Solemnly swear...”. In your own words, what does every president promise to do when it comes to the Constitution?
- 4. Read the inset that begins with “The framers or writers ...”. How does this explanation compare with your answer to prereading question A?

Chapter 2—A Bungled Break-in

- 5. Why did reporters think that the burglary at the Democratic National Party headquarters was both odd and important?

6. What questions did reporters have even after they wrote the first article about the break-in?

Chapter 3—Investigating

7. Thomas Jefferson said, “Where the press is free and every man able to read, all is safe.” What did he mean?
8. Using details from the text, summarize the strategies the reporters used to investigate the story. How do you think investigative reporting strategies have changed since 1972?

Chapter 4—Worrisome Facts

9. Analyze the title of chapter four. Why did the reporters think that the information they got from the White House and campaign employees was worrisome?
10. Who was MF? What role did he play in helping the reporters?
11. Why do you think most Americans did not pay attention to the Watergate story during the summer and fall of 1972?

Chapter 5—Exercising the First Amendment

12. Why did Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein worry about making any mistakes in their reporting?
13. What is the difference between a news article and an opinion piece? Do you think it is important for news organizations to make the difference clear to the viewer or reader? Explain your answer.
14. What is the role of a free press? In what ways did the president and his men attack the First Amendment?

Chapter 6—An Angry Judge

15. What is the role of a grand jury?
16. Why was James McCord’s letter to Judge Sirica important in solving the Watergate case?

Chapter 7—The Senate Steps In

17. Why did the Senate do its own investigation of the Watergate scandal?
18. What mistake did Sam Dash think James McCord had made? Do you think other people made this same mistake? Give examples to support your answer.

19. Why did Dash and Senator Sam Ervin believe that the American people needed to know what had happened?
20. Why was Sam Dash overwhelmed by his responsibility as head lawyer for the Senate Watergate Committee? What kind of traits, skills, or prior experiences do you think someone holding this type of role should have? Did Dash meet that criteria?

Chapter 8—Revelations

21. Why do you think so many Americans watched the Senate Watergate hearings?
22. What adjectives would you use to describe John Dean's testimony?
23. What did Alexander Butterfield reveal to the committee? Why did his revelation make headlines?

Chapter 9—Prosecuting the President's Men

24. Nixon told his aides, "You must keep up the attack on the media." Why do you think he insisted on this?
25. Why did Senator Ervin believe that the president could not use "executive privilege" to avoid turning over documents in investigation of criminal acts?
26. Explain the meaning of the phrase "no person is above the law."

Chapter 10—Turning Point

27. Why did Nixon want to fire Archibald Cox? Why did his attorney general refuse?
28. Read the quote from Archibald Cox that begins with "Whether ours shall continue..." Put it into your own words.

Chapter 11—The People Speak

29. Why were Americans so angry about the "Saturday Night Massacre"?
30. Summarize the meaning and process of impeachment.

Chapter 12—The House Investigates

31. What adjectives would you use to describe what people learned about the president from the tape transcripts he released?

32. What did Peter Rodino and his staff find when they compared the transcripts to the actual tapes?

Chapter 13—The Supreme Court Rules

33. Why did so many people stand in line in front of the Supreme Court Building in July, 1974?
34. Why was it important that the Supreme Court ruled *unanimously* that Nixon had to turn over the tapes?

Chapter 14—Debating Impeachment

35. Read the Rodino quote that begins “Throughout all of the painstaking...” What idea did he say guided him throughout the Judiciary Committee’s proceedings?
36. What is the meaning of *bipartisan*? Why was it important to Rodino to have a bipartisan vote?
37. Summarize the three articles of impeachment, using one sentence for each. Read the title of each article for guidance.

Chapter 15--Reckoning

38. What is meant by “the smoking gun tape”?
39. Why did President Gerald Ford give the former president a pardon?
40. According to the author, what can ordinary citizens do to keep something like Watergate from happening again? Do you agree or disagree?

Extension Activities

(The activities below correlate to Common Core Standards CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8-1; 3H.6-8-4; RH.6-8.7; 9; RH.6-8.10)

Primary and Secondary Sources

Look through the sources listed in the book’s bibliography and identify which are primary sources and which are secondary sources. Be sure you can explain your reasoning. Why or when would you use one over the other? Do you think it’s important to have both in a book like this?

Vocabulary

Make a list of words or terms that were new to you or that you were unsure of, particularly words or terms related to government. Define each word or term and choose ten words to use in sentences.

Timeline

Make a timeline of at least eight events in the Watergate story and investigation, from 1970-1974. How did one event impact another? Do you see any direct links or unexpected connections looking at the events in this format? Discuss your experiences in a small group or as a class.

Government Web

Make a web or chart of the three branches of government and the pieces of the Watergate story that fit into each branch.

Chart Your Thinking

The House Judiciary Committee voted on three articles of impeachment:

- I. Obstruction of Justice
- II. Abuse of Power
- III. Defiance of Subpoenas

Make a chart of the three charges with examples of Nixon's actions that led to each charge.

Hall of Fame

Choose **three** of the people discussed in the book—reporters, judges, Senators, prosecutors, members of the House of Representatives, or Nixon aides—whom you would nominate for an American Heroes Hall of Fame. Make a certificate for each explaining their contributions and your reasoning.

Further Research

As of 2021, there have been four presidential impeachment trials in the Senate. Using resources in your school library or the Internet, conduct research for an overview report on all four or work in a small group to compile a more detailed report on one of those impeachments. Share your findings with your class, and make sure to cite your sources.

This guide was created by the author of Conspiracy, P. O'Connell Pearson. She is a former history teacher with a master's degree in education from George Mason University. She has contributed to and edited history textbooks and published articles in magazines and newspapers including The Washington Post. Always enthusiastic about sharing the stories of history, she earned her MFA in writing for young people from Lesley University and now writes both historical fiction and nonfiction.

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