

Nixon's Gamble: How a President's Own Secret Government Destroyed His Administration

Ray Locker

Lyons Press. 339 pp. \$29.95

Nixon's Overreach—and an Author's

By James Robenalt

Ray Locker's book is a disappointment. He obviously invested a great deal of time reading primary documents and listening to presidential recordings, the kind of basic research that is critical to any insightful account of the Nixon presidency. Unfortunately, Locker then mixed primary source material with highly dubious secondary sources, thereby casting doubt on the integrity of the entire work.

[*Nixon's Gamble*](#) begins promisingly. Locker accurately describes Richard Nixon's proclivity for secrecy and his divide-and-conquer strategy to marginalize institutions that he did not trust: the State Department, in particular, but also the military and the Central Intelligence Agency. Nixon's mishandling of these stakeholders caused an unprecedented reaction, particularly in the Pentagon. For more than a year, the Joint Chiefs of Staff's liaison office at the National Security Council purloined documents containing information that was not being shared by the president and his equally secretive national security adviser.

Little about this story of secret back-channels and severe institutional jockeying is particularly new, though Locker does a commendable job of pulling together the strands and putting it all in context. Nixon had good reason, of course, to worry about leaks and their impact on his bold but surreptitious initiatives with respect to China and the Vietnam war. The clandestine negotiations that led to the China breakthrough, and the back-channel meetings in Paris with the North Vietnamese, could have been endangered by an unregulated flow of information to the press. And, of course, there is nothing really unique about presidents keeping secrets, especially in the realm of national security. During World War II, Franklin Roosevelt famously said that he never let his right hand know what his left hand was doing. Given that Nixon and Henry Kissinger, the national security advisor, were trying to end U.S. involvement in a war and simultaneously triangulate relations with the Soviet Union and China, they cannot be blamed for obsessing, to a degree, over the secrecy of their initiatives.

Locker argues that Nixon's fixation over secrecy—leading to what he calls a “secret government”—was what destroyed his presidency. Yet other presidents, notably Lyndon B. Johnson, Nixon's immediate predecessor, were also exasperated constantly by leaks to the press, judging from the LBJ tapes. What genuinely distinguished Nixon was his vindictive nature and wrong-headed belief that as president he was above the law. Nixon fought so hard in politics (he called it his “rock-em, sock-em” style), and was simultaneously so bruised by the jousting and what he believed was a media double-standard, that he effectively lost perspective and accepted the idea that his ends justified virtually any means.

Take, for example, the [Pentagon Papers](#) episode. There is no question that [Daniel Ellsberg's](#) release of this confidential study on the origins of the Vietnam War was against the law. Indeed, Ellsberg was ready to accept responsibility for his actions. But the White House reaction was equally illegal. Believing (falsely) that he had been let down by the FBI, Nixon ordered the formation of a private investigative group in the White House, the Special Investigations Unit, aka the “Plumbers,” to investigate and discredit Ellsberg.

As Locker points out, Nixon can be heard on tapes in 1971—months before the [Watergate](#) break-ins—ordering a burglary at the Brookings Institution to retrieve Pentagon Papers-related documents allegedly still housed there. Nixon pounds his desk to emphasize his order. It would have been an illegal act had it been carried out, but the president did not consider it as such. As Nixon later told journalist [David Frost](#), “if the president orders it, then it is not illegal.”

In September 1971, the Plumbers (read [E. Howard Hunt](#) and G. Gordon Liddy) broke into the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist in Beverly Hills to find dirt on the anti-war dissident. This black-bag operation was approved in writing by Nixon's top domestic adviser, [John Ehrlichman](#). An extralegal atmosphere, in other words, permeated the Nixon White House.

Notwithstanding this interpretative difference, where Locker's book really goes off the rails is in his recounting of the Watergate break-ins and cover-up. Here he abandons primary sources and begins to quote almost exclusively from highly discredited books that have spun a preposterous “alternative theory” about the reason for the break-ins, and who authorized them. These accounts claim that John Dean ordered the law-breaking because of his interest in a supposed call-girl ring that serviced the Democratic National Committee (DNC).

Locker does not bother to tell the reader about the suspect nature of his sources; instead, he writes his narrative as if it were based on established, irrefutable facts. One looks in vain for even the obligatory “it is alleged,” let alone some reference to the mountain of contrary evidence developed by the FBI, the Senate Select Committee, the House Judiciary Committee, the slew of participants, culprits, journalists, and historians who have written about Watergate, not to mention the Nixon tapes. Nor is there a nod to

the nine years of litigation pursued by Dean (and his wife) against the authors and publisher of this faux revisionist history.

“In May [1972], Dean told Magruder, who worked with Liddy and Hunt, to break into the DNC headquarters to bug two telephones,” Locker writes. Yet there is no reliable primary evidence to support Locker’s flat assertion. Though to this day conflicting testimonies about what happened are irreconcilable, Dean was simply not present at the 30 March 1972 gathering in Key Biscayne, Florida where final consideration was given to a drastically pared-down version of Liddy’s intelligence-gathering plan—one that included surreptitious entry into DNC headquarters. Only [John Mitchell](#), director of the Committee for the Re-election of the President (CRP), [Jeb Magruder](#), the CRP’s deputy director, and [Fred LaRue](#), a special consultant at the White House, were present at this meeting, which, regardless of how it precisely ended, resulted promptly in an \$83,000 cash advance to Liddy for his intelligence project, code-named GEMSTONE.^[1]

After the first DNC break-in on May 28 failed to produce the desired results, according to Locker, “Dean told Magruder [that the] Hunt-Liddy team needed to go into the DNC again.” There is no reliable primary evidence that Dean ordered this second break-in either. While the sworn testimonies again conflict, the impetus for the re-entry came from the trio of Mitchell, Magruder, and Liddy. Depending on whose account one chooses to believe, it was either Liddy’s “own notion” or he acted after being on the receiving end of complaints from either Mitchell or Magruder.^[2]

I know this record well because, for the past five years, I have worked with Dean on a continuing legal education program for lawyers on the lessons of Watergate and the mistakes made by the Nixon administration, including most prominently those of the president’s legal counsel—John Dean. As the self-admitted “desk officer” for the cover-up, he took his share of the responsibility when he went to prosecutors and testified before the Senate. But Dean did not approve GEMSTONE or order the break-ins.

What is particularly egregious here is that Locker blatantly failed to follow what most would consider journalism ethics 101, even as he touts his journalistic chops as “the Washington enterprise editor of *USA Today*.” Besides not presenting all the evidence—Locker cites only a slanted, bogus view—he did not even attempt to contact Dean (or apparently [Bob Woodward](#), or others he attacks) for countervailing comment. One presumes that as an editor of a major national newspaper he would not sanction such behavior by one of his reporters.

Woodward is maligned too. In addition to embracing the patently false story that Dean instigated the break-ins, the oddest thing about *Nixon’s Gamble* is its confused and confusing account of the roles played by FBI executives (and deadly rivals) [W. Mark Felt](#) and [William Sullivan](#). [Stanley Kutler](#), the dean of Watergate historians, was the first to point out that the “wars of Watergate” encompassed a number of conflicts, including some that were seemingly tangential. The most prominent of these was the “war of the FBI succession,” that is, the bitter contest to succeed [J. Edgar Hoover](#), who had died in May 1972. The [selective leaks to the media](#) by Felt (aka “[Deep Throat](#),” Woodward’s

über-secret source) and Sullivan had a pronounced effect on how the Watergate scandal unfolded in public, with results that neither Felt nor Sullivan wanted or ever imagined.^[3]

Woodward's explanations for what Felt did and why he did it has been questioned, and Locker's skepticism here is not unwarranted. Locker is also correct to pay more attention to Sullivan's role than most books on Watergate ever have. Yet *Nixon's Gamble* ends up positing a Byzantine and frankly unbelievable scenario here (i.e., Felt was not Deep Throat) in keeping with Locker's notion that it was not the Nixon mindset that caused his downfall, but a cabal out to get him in revenge for his "secret government."

False histories serve a negative purpose. Fundamental distortions presented as fact lead to myths that can be hard to dislodge from the popular imagination (think about the Obama "birther" controversy). A sex story may be a more titillating explanation for why the DNC offices were broken into, and perhaps sells more books, but in the process history suffers. Watergate's lesson is that a president is not above the law. And histories built on dubious conjecture and innuendo undermine that hard-fought lesson of Watergate.

As Nixon seemingly recognized on his last day in the White House, his own vindictiveness, which resulted in his willingness to play the game outside the lines, brought about his demise. "Always remember," he told a crowd gathered in the East Room, "others may hate you. But those who hate you don't win unless you hate them. And then you destroy yourself."

James Robenalt is a presidential historian, and lawyer with the Cleveland firm of Thompson Hine LLP. His most recent book is [*January 1973: Watergate, Roe v. Wade, Vietnam, and the Month That Changed America Forever*](#).

[1] Locker, *Nixon's Gamble*, 172; US Senate, Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities, [*Final Report*](#), 93d Congress, 2d Session (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1974), [24-26](#). Magruder said Mitchell reluctantly approved GEMSTONE; Mitchell denied doing so; and LaRue's recollection was that Mitchell said the issue didn't have to be decided at the meeting.

[2] Locker, *Nixon's Gamble*, 173; Senate Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities, [*Final Report*](#), [30-31](#).

[3] Stanley Kutler, [*The Wars of Watergate: The Last Crisis of Richard Nixon*](#) (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), xii.