Power Under Scrutiny

Trace the decisions and challenges that led to Nixon's resignation.

9-12.US2.34 "Examine the causes and consequences of the constitutional crisis that led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline actions Nixon took to block scrutiny, and circle actions by Congress or the courts that challenged those actions.

When Watergate Became a Constitutional Crisis

1. On June 17, 1972, police arrested five men inside the Democratic National Committee offices at the Watergate complex in Washington, D.C. Investigators soon linked the burglars to President Richard Nixon's reelection campaign. The break-in did not by itself prove Nixon had ordered it, but the investigation threatened to expose efforts by his aides to hide the campaign's involvement. On June 23, Nixon agreed to a plan to have the CIA tell the FBI to limit its inquiry, using national security as a pretext. What began as a criminal investigation was becoming a test of whether a president could obstruct one.

2. In 1973, televised Senate hearings exposed a wider cover-up, and a former White House aide revealed that Nixon had secretly recorded conversations in his office. A special prosecutor demanded the tapes as evidence; Nixon resisted, claiming executive privilege, the president's need for confidential advice. In October, Nixon ordered the prosecutor, Archibald Cox, fired. Two senior Justice Department officials resigned rather than carry out that order, and another official dismissed Cox. Known as the Saturday Night Massacre, these events raised a sharp question: Could the president control an investigation into his own conduct while withholding evidence from the courts?

3. In July 1974, the Supreme Court ruled unanimously in United States v. Nixon that Nixon had to surrender the tapes for a criminal trial. The justices recognized executive privilege but rejected his claim that it could shield relevant evidence from the court. The House Judiciary Committee approved articles of impeachment for obstruction of justice, abuse of power, and contempt of Congress. After a released tape showed Nixon had backed the plan to limit the FBI's investigation, he resigned on August 9, before the full House voted. The crisis affirmed limits on presidential secrecy and deepened public distrust of government.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Why did Nixon's June 23 plan turn the burglary investigation into a question about presidential power?

2. How did Nixon's response to demands for the tapes intensify the conflict over investigating his conduct?

3. How did the Supreme Court's ruling limit Nixon's claim of executive privilege?

4. How did the released tape and the House Judiciary Committee's actions help bring about Nixon's resignation?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a 75 to 100 word memo to a future president. Use two specific moments from the passage to explain how attempts to protect the presidency can create a constitutional crisis, identify one consequence, and propose your own rule for responding to a lawful investigation.

ANSWER KEY

Power Under Scrutiny

HIGH SCHOOL · 9-12.US2.34

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline actions Nixon took to block scrutiny, and circle actions by Congress or the courts that challenged those actions. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Why did Nixon's June 23 plan turn the burglary investigation into a question about presidential power?	**Nixon agreed to use the CIA to limit the FBI's inquiry under a national security pretext, raising the question of whether a president could obstruct an investigation.**
2	How did Nixon's response to demands for the tapes intensify the conflict over investigating his conduct?	**He claimed executive privilege to resist surrendering the tapes and ordered prosecutor Archibald Cox fired, raising concerns that he could control the investigation while withholding evidence.**
3	How did the Supreme Court's ruling limit Nixon's claim of executive privilege?	**The Court recognized executive privilege but ruled that it could not shield relevant tapes from a criminal trial, so Nixon had to surrender them.**
4	How did the released tape and the House Judiciary Committee's actions help bring about Nixon's resignation?	**The committee had approved impeachment articles, and the released tape showed Nixon backed the plan to limit the FBI inquiry. He resigned before the full House voted.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

To a future president: Do not treat an investigation as a threat you can make disappear. Nixon's plan to use the CIA to limit the FBI inquiry turned a burglary case into a question about presidential obstruction. When he resisted the demand for tapes, the Supreme Court required their release for a criminal trial. The House committee approved impeachment articles, and a released tape helped bring about his resignation. My rule is to preserve records and let investigators seek evidence through the courts, even when disclosure is politically damaging.

Accept responses that accurately connect two distinct actions to challenges from Congress or the courts, identify a consequence of the crisis, and state a defensible rule of the student's own.