Trust Under Pressure

Vietnam, Watergate, and checks on power

9-12.US2.35 "Analyze how Vietnam and Watergate reduced American faith in government and the military and led to significant political, constitutional, and legislative reforms."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline one detail about Vietnam and one about Watergate that weakened public trust. Circle one government response to each, then number each detail and its matching response 1 or 2.

When Trust Changed the Rules

1. In 1968, the Tet Offensive struck cities across South Vietnam after U.S. leaders had suggested victory was near. U.S. and South Vietnamese forces pushed back the attacks, but the scale of the fighting made official optimism harder to trust. In 1971, the Pentagon Papers revealed that earlier administrations had misled the public about the war. As casualties mounted and the draft sent young Americans to fight, many citizens questioned both government honesty and military leadership, even while respecting individual service members.

2. The war also raised a question of power: could a president continue a conflict without clear approval from Congress? In 1973, Congress passed the War Powers Resolution over President Nixon's veto. It required presidents to notify Congress soon after sending U.S. forces into combat and generally to end their involvement within 60 days without congressional authorization. The law aimed to give elected lawmakers a stronger voice in decisions about war. Its passage showed how distrust could produce a legislative check on presidential power.

3. In 1972, burglars linked to Nixon's reelection campaign broke into Democratic Party offices at the Watergate complex. The administration's cover-up, exposed through investigations and White House recordings, deepened distrust of the presidency. In 1974, the Supreme Court ruled that Nixon could not withhold the recordings from a criminal investigation by claiming absolute executive privilege. Nixon resigned soon afterward. Congress also tightened campaign finance laws and created the Federal Election Commission to enforce them, seeking to curb abuses in elections and restore public confidence.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did the Tet Offensive and the Pentagon Papers each weaken trust in U.S. leaders?

2. What concern raised by the Vietnam War did the War Powers Resolution address, and how?

3. How did the Supreme Court's ruling in the Watergate investigation limit presidential power?

4. Why were tighter campaign finance laws and the Federal Election Commission responses to Watergate?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write four sentences proposing one oversight practice not described in the passage. Explain how it could address the loss of trust caused by both Vietnam and Watergate, and name one risk or limit.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · 9-12.US2.35

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline one detail about Vietnam and one about Watergate that weakened public trust. Circle one government response to each, then number each detail and its matching response 1 or 2. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did the Tet Offensive and the Pentagon Papers each weaken trust in U.S. leaders?	**Tet made claims that victory was near seem unreliable. The Pentagon Papers showed that earlier administrations had misled the public about the war.**
2	What concern raised by the Vietnam War did the War Powers Resolution address, and how?	**It addressed concern about a president continuing a conflict without clear congressional approval by requiring notice to Congress and generally limiting involvement without its authorization.**
3	How did the Supreme Court's ruling in the Watergate investigation limit presidential power?	**The Court ruled that Nixon could not claim absolute executive privilege to withhold recordings from a criminal investigation.**
4	Why were tighter campaign finance laws and the Federal Election Commission responses to Watergate?	**The burglary was linked to Nixon's reelection campaign, so Congress tightened election rules and created an agency to enforce them.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Congress could create an independent review office with access to executive records and a duty to publish its findings. During a war, it could check official claims about military progress against verified reports. During a scandal like Watergate, it could compare public statements with available records. The office would need to protect troop locations and evidence in ongoing criminal cases.

Accept other feasible oversight practices that connect both events to lost trust and identify a plausible limit. Distinguish the Supreme Court's constitutional check on executive privilege from the laws passed by Congress.