Power Under Scrutiny

Read how Watergate tested presidential power and changed public life.

USH.6.10 "Explain the constitutional, political, and cultural significance of the Watergate Scandal and the United States Supreme Court decision of United States v. Nixon."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline efforts to block the investigation, circle the Supreme Court's limit on presidential power, and label one political effect P and one cultural effect C.

When the Tapes Became Evidence

1. On June 17, 1972, police caught five men inside the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate complex in Washington, D.C. The burglars had links to President Richard Nixon's reelection campaign. As reporters and investigators followed the money and testimony, they found that Nixon's aides had tried to hide the campaign's connection to the break-in. The scandal grew from a burglary into a question about whether a president and his staff could use government power to block a criminal investigation.

2. Investigators learned that Nixon had secretly recorded White House conversations. A prosecutor sought the tapes for a criminal trial, but Nixon refused, claiming executive privilege, a president's need for private advice. In *United States v. Nixon* (1974), the Supreme Court ruled that a general claim of confidentiality could not outweigh the need for evidence in a criminal case. The Court ordered Nixon to surrender the tapes. This decision showed that a president must obey the law and cannot withhold evidence simply because he holds office.

3. One released recording showed Nixon had taken part in the effort to stop the FBI's investigation. With impeachment likely, he resigned on August 9, 1974. Politically, Congress responded with campaign finance changes that required more public reporting of donations and created the Federal Election Commission. Culturally, the scandal deepened distrust of national leaders and made investigative reporting a more visible check on power. Watergate left a lasting question for voters: how can citizens hold leaders accountable when those leaders try to hide what they have done?

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Why did the break-in become a question about presidential power?

2. How did the Supreme Court's decision limit Nixon's claim of executive privilege?

3. How did Watergate lead to a political change described in the passage?

4. How did Watergate change public attitudes or the role of reporting?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine a future president refuses to give investigators private conversations needed for a criminal trial involving aides. In four sentences, explain how the Watergate decision applies, then predict one political effect and one cultural effect if the president keeps trying to hide evidence.

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PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline efforts to block the investigation, circle the Supreme Court's limit on presidential power, and label one political effect P and one cultural effect C. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Why did the break-in become a question about presidential power?	**Nixon's aides tried to hide the campaign's connection to the break-in, raising the question of whether officials could use government power to block an investigation.**
2	How did the Supreme Court's decision limit Nixon's claim of executive privilege?	**The Court ruled that a general claim of confidentiality could not outweigh the need for evidence in a criminal case and ordered Nixon to surrender the tapes.**
3	How did Watergate lead to a political change described in the passage?	**Congress responded with campaign finance changes requiring more public reporting of donations and creating the Federal Election Commission.**
4	How did Watergate change public attitudes or the role of reporting?	**It deepened distrust of national leaders and made investigative reporting a more visible check on power.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

The Watergate decision means the president cannot use a general claim of privacy to keep needed evidence from a criminal trial. A court could order the conversations turned over. If the president kept trying to hide them, lawmakers might propose stronger rules for preserving government records. People might also become less trusting of national leaders and pay closer attention to investigative reporting.

Accept responses that connect the Court's ruling to the need for evidence in a criminal case. Political and cultural predictions may differ from the sample if each is plausible and clearly distinguished.