

The Watergate Tapes

Not long after President Nixon's 1972 reelection, the huge Watergate scandal began to unfold. The root of the scandal was a break-in at the Democratic Party's headquarters in Washington, D.C. Tapes of White House conversations later revealed that Richard Nixon and his top aides had tried to cover up the break-in:

“H. R. Haldeman [assistant to the President]:

Now, on the investigation, you know, the Democratic break-in thing, we're back to the—in the problem area because the FBI is not under control, because [FBI Director L. Patrick] Gray doesn't exactly know how to control them [his agents]. . . . [The] way to handle this now is for us to have [Deputy CIA Director] Walters call Pat Gray and just say, 'Stay . . . out of this.' . . .

President Nixon: You call them in. . . . Play it tough. That's the way they play it and that's the way we are going to play it.”

—Taped conversation, Oval Office, White House, June 23, 1972

▲ Nixon and aide H. R. Haldeman

Nixon and the Watergate Scandal

Objectives

- Describe Richard Nixon's attitude toward “big” government.
- Analyze Nixon's southern strategy.
- Explain the Watergate incident and its consequences.

Terms and People

silent majority
stagflation
OPEC
southern strategy

affirmative action
Watergate
Twenty-fifth Amendment
executive privilege

NoteTaking

Reading Skill: Identify Main Ideas Record Nixon's major domestic policies and goals in a chart like the one below.

Nixon's Domestic Policies and Strategies	
New Federalism	Southern Strategy

Why It Matters President Richard Nixon stood at the summit of his long government career when he was reelected President in a landslide in November 1972. Yet, less than two years later, Nixon left office in disgrace, the first time a President of the United States had resigned. The Watergate scandal gripped the nation and shaped the values and attitudes toward government that many Americans hold today. **Section Focus Question:** What events led to Richard Nixon's resignation as President in 1974?

Nixon's Policies Target Middle America

Richard Nixon's political career had more ups and downs than a roller coaster ride. Brought up in hard times, he worked his way through college and law school. After service in the navy during World War II, Nixon was elected to the House of Representatives in 1946 and then to the Senate in 1950. As Dwight Eisenhower's running mate in 1952, he became Vice President with Eisenhower's victory. Nixon was not yet 40 years old.

Then came the defeats. In 1960, Nixon narrowly lost to John F. Kennedy in the race for the White House. Two years later, Nixon's career hit bottom when he lost an election to become governor of California. In 1968, however, Nixon made a dramatic comeback, narrowly defeating Democrat Hubert Humphrey to win the presidency.

Nixon Calls for a “New Federalism” During the campaign for President, Nixon cast himself as the spokesperson for those he called Middle Americans, or the **silent majority**. As Nixon put it at the 1968 Republican convention, he sought to speak for the “non-shouters, the non-demonstrators,” the men and women who “work in America’s factories . . . run America’s businesses . . . serve in the Government . . . provide most of the soldiers . . . [and] give life to the American dream.”

Winning the support of Middle America proved a tricky task. Nixon believed that Americans had tired of the “big” government of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society. However, he also believed that the American people still wanted the government to address various social ills, ranging from crime to pollution.

Nixon’s solution was to call for the establishment of a “new federalism.” As he explained in his 1971 State of the Union address, the nation needed “to reverse the flow of power and resources from the States and communities to Washington and start power and resources flowing back from Washington to the States and communities.” Nixon proposed revenue sharing with the states. Under revenue sharing, the federal government gave the states the money to fund social programs. The states then controlled the operations of these programs.

Nixon Expands the Government’s Role However, while returning power and money to the states, Nixon also sponsored many programs that increased the size and role of the federal government. During his presidency, a number of powerful new federal agencies and laws came into existence. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regulates workplaces to make them safer for workers. The DEA, or Drug Enforcement Administration, administers the federal war against illegal drugs. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) enforces federal environmental standards. The Clean Air Act, signed into law in 1970, gives the EPA the power to set air quality standards.

Nixon’s welfare policies also reflected his complicated domestic strategy. To decrease the power of the federal government, Nixon began to dismantle the Office of Economic Opportunity, the cornerstone of Lyndon Johnson’s “war on poverty.” Yet, Nixon also proposed creating a Family Assistance Plan (FAP), which called for providing a guaranteed or minimum income to every American family. Although the FAP did not become law, federal spending on other social welfare programs, such as Medicare and public housing, grew steadily, especially during Nixon’s early years.

The Economy Struggles As his presidency progressed, Nixon grappled with an increasingly troublesome economy. After decades of strong growth and low inflation, the U.S. economy experienced both recession and inflation at the same time. These symptoms began during the Johnson administration, but they grew stronger during the Nixon years. The combination of recession and inflation baffled economists and led them to coin a new term, **stagflation**, to describe the dual conditions of a stagnating economy and inflationary pressures.

Stagflation had several causes. Expanding federal budget deficits caused by the Vietnam War produced inflation. Another cause was rising foreign competition, which cost thousands of Americans their jobs. Heavy industries such as steel and auto production, which had enjoyed a dominant position since World War II, proved especially vulnerable to foreign competition. Yet

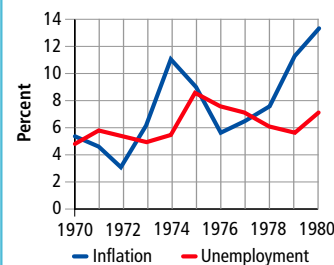
Vocabulary Builder

pollution—(puh LOO shuhn) *n.*
environmental contamination

An Overwhelming Wave

While inflation drove prices up, most workers’ wages stayed the same, causing the money they earned to buy fewer necessary goods. *How would high unemployment make the situation shown in the cartoon even worse?*

Inflation and Unemployment Rates, 1970–1980



SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics



the factor that caused most Americans pain was the rapid increase in the price of oil.

During the 1973 war between Israel and its Arab neighbors, the **Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)**, a group of mostly Arab countries that sells oil to other nations and cooperates to regulate the price and supply of oil, placed an embargo on Israel's allies, including the United States. Dependent on imports for nearly one-thirds of their energy, Americans soon felt the sting of this embargo as oil prices skyrocketed 400 percent in a single year. The embargo lasted until the spring of 1974 and resulted in gas lines at the pumps that stretched for blocks. With the end of the embargo, gas prices remained high.

Nixon fought stagflation in a variety of ways. Most dramatically, in August 1971, he placed a 90-day freeze on all wages and prices. The controls worked for a short time, causing a spurt of economic growth. However, price controls do not work well in a free economy, and the economy went into a tailspin in the mid-1970s.

✔ **Checkpoint** What was the goal of President Nixon's "new federalism"?

Turmoil Over Busing

Court-ordered busing continued to be a controversial issue in the 1970s. A police escort (left) protects a school bus carrying African American students into a white neighborhood as part of the busing. Anti-busing demonstrations (right) went on around the country. *Why do you think that busing provoked such a strong reaction?*

Nixon Follows a Southern Strategy

Having narrowly won the presidency in 1968, Richard Nixon set out to expand his base of support. He targeted blue-collar workers and southern whites, both of whom had traditionally voted for Democrats. By winning the support of southern whites, Nixon hoped to make the Republican Party a powerful force in the South. Commentators called this Nixon's **southern strategy**.

Controversy Rages Over Busing As part of his southern strategy, Nixon tried to place a number of conservative southerners as judges in federal courts. Most prominently, he nominated Clement Haynsworth and G. Harrold Carswell to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court. Both men failed to win Senate confirmation, in part because both had supported segregation in the past.

Criticizing court-ordered busing of children to schools outside their neighborhood was another way Nixon reached out to southern whites and urban blue-collar workers. For years, many school districts in both the South and the North had resisted desegregation. In 1971, federal courts ordered school districts to bus students to achieve greater racial balance. Recognizing the unpopularity of busing, Nixon made a nationally televised address in which he called for a moratorium, or freeze, on court-ordered busing. By speaking forcefully, Nixon won the support of many busing opponents.

Nixon Proposes New Civil Rights Initiatives Yet, as with much else that he did, Nixon's stance on civil rights was mixed. In 1969, the Nixon administration initiated the Philadelphia Plan, a program



that required labor unions and federal contractors to submit goals and timetables for the hiring of minorities. It was a type of **affirmative action**, a policy that gives special consideration to women and minorities in the fields of education and employment, in order to make up for past discrimination. Nixon's Assistant Secretary of Labor, Arthur Fletcher, who designed the Philadelphia Plan, argued:

Primary Source

“The Federal Government has an obligation to see that every citizen has an equal chance at the most basic freedom of all—the right to succeed. . . . Segregation didn't occur naturally—it was imposed. . . . The gap . . . between black and white . . . was growing wider and wider. . . . Visible, measurable goals to correct [these] imbalances are essential.”

—Arthur Fletcher, Assistant Secretary of Labor, speech on affirmative action, 1969

Nixon's Strategy Succeeds By the 1972 election, Nixon enjoyed high approval ratings. Some of this popularity was based on his trips to the Soviet Union and China. Some was based on his domestic policies.

Nixon ran a masterful political campaign in 1972, positioning himself as a moderate. He portrayed his opponents—George McGovern, an antiwar senator from South Dakota, and Alabama governor George Wallace—as extremists. (Wallace's campaign was cut short when he was shot and left paralyzed by a would-be assassin.) Nixon and his Vice President, Spiro Agnew, successfully cast themselves as spokespersons for the silent majority. On election day, Nixon won almost 61 percent of the popular vote and nearly all of the electoral votes. He became the first Republican presidential candidate to sweep the entire South.

✓ **Checkpoint** In what ways did Nixon appear to send mixed messages about civil rights?

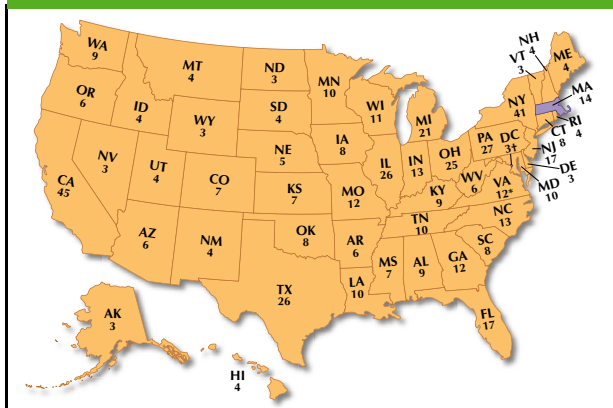
The Watergate Scandal Brings Nixon Down

As a triumphant Richard Nixon stood before the cameras on election night 1972, he had no idea that the seeds of his downfall had already begun to sprout. The botched burglary of Democratic Party headquarters at the Watergate complex in June 1972 received little attention at first. But as investigators began to unravel the connections between the burglars and the White House, **Watergate**, as the scandal became known, came to dominate the national news.

The Watergate burglars were tried in 1973. After the trial, one of them, James McCord, charged that administration officials had been involved in the break-in. This led to a Senate investigation and to televised hearings, where numerous witnesses charged that the President and his top aides had taken part in a coverup. From the first news of the break-in, President Nixon denied any wrongdoing. Yet, as time went on, investigators discovered important links between the burglars and top Nixon administration officials.

Watergate Goes Public Two young *Washington Post* journalists, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, played a crucial role in lifting the veil of secrecy from

Presidential Election of 1972



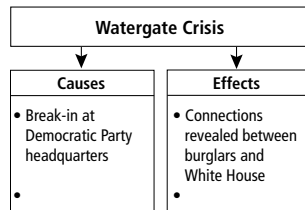
Candidate (Party)	Electoral Vote	Popular Vote	% Electoral Vote	% Popular Vote
Richard M. Nixon (Republican)	520	46,740,323	96.7	60.7
George S. McGovern (Democratic)	17	28,901,598	3.1	37.5
Other	1	1,341,502	0.2	1.7

*One elector from Virginia voted for John Hoppers (Libertarian)

†McGovern received 3 electoral votes from Washington, D.C.

NoteTaking

Reading Skill: Identify Causes and Effects Use a chart like the one below to record the causes and effects of the Watergate crisis.



Vocabulary Builder

crucial—(KROO shuhl) *adj.* of vital importance

the Watergate scandal. The two reporters followed tips provided by a secret government informant known as “Deep Throat,” who was later revealed to be a top official of the FBI. Woodward and Bernstein reported that the men, who had attempted to burglarize the Watergate hotel, had close ties to Nixon’s reelection committee.

Nixon repeatedly proclaimed his innocence. For example, in November 1973, long after evidence had implicated his top aides and forced them to resign, Nixon declared, “I am not a crook.” Yet the polls indicated that the public disagreed. One poll, taken the next month, showed that fewer than one in five Americans believed that he was being honest about the Watergate affair.

The Watergate scandal created a historic showdown between the three branches of government. How far would Congress go to investigate the President? Would the courts demand that the President turn over information that

Events That Changed America

WATERGATE FORCES NIXON FROM OFFICE

One of the biggest political scandals in American history, Watergate has become synonymous with corruption and abuse of power. It began when President Nixon’s reelection committee tried to record the conversations of political opponents, led to a string of coverups at the highest levels of the U.S. government, and ultimately forced Nixon from office. Nixon’s role in the coverup shocked the nation.

The public might never have learned of the President’s actions without the investigative reporting of journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of the *Washington Post*, who broke the story in a series of articles. Their revelations, and those of other reporters, may have left the American people’s faith in government shaken, but the aftermath reinforced the public’s trust in the constitutional system.



June 1972

Five men linked to President Nixon’s reelection campaign are arrested for trying to bug the offices of the Democratic National Committee in the Watergate complex (shown here) in Washington, D.C.

April 1973 Nixon denies knowledge of the Watergate break-in or any coverup.

May 1973 Archibald Cox is named as the Justice Department’s special prosecutor for Watergate. The Senate Watergate Committee begins nationally televised hearings.

June 1973

Former White House counsel John Dean (right) tells investigators that Nixon authorized a coverup.



◀ Members of Congress hold a news conference about the scandal in May 1974.



might implicate him? And if the courts sided with Congress, would the President comply with its decisions?

Revealing the White House Tapes The Watergate scandal came to a climax with a dizzying array of developments. In the fall of 1973, Vice President Spiro Agnew resigned in the face of an unrelated corruption scandal. According to the procedures established by the **Twenty-fifth Amendment**, which deals with presidential succession, Nixon nominated Gerald Ford to become his new Vice President. Nixon's troubles multiplied when, in the summer of 1973, it was revealed that he had been secretly taping Oval Office conversations for many years. Many commentators speculated that these tapes would show that the President had played a leading role in trying to cover up the break-in.

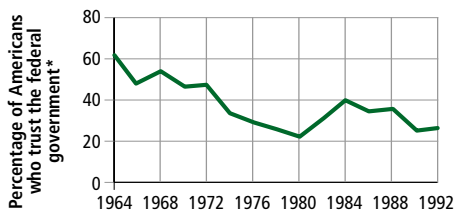


July 1973 Nixon, claiming executive privilege, refuses to release the tapes of secretly recorded Oval Office conversations.

October 1973 Nixon offers investigators summaries of tapes, which Special Prosecutor Cox refuses. Nixon fires Cox. This triggers other firings and resignations in what becomes known as the Saturday Night Massacre.

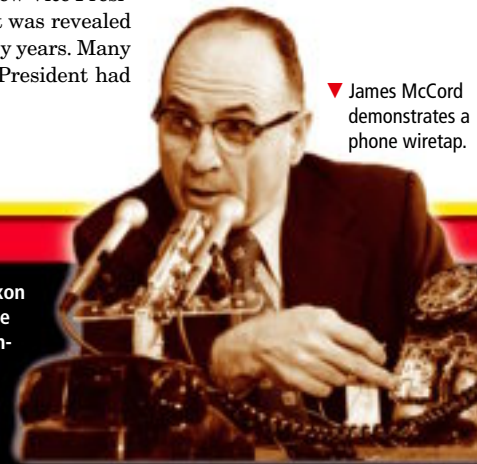


Public Trust in the Federal Government, 1964–1992



SOURCE: The American National Election Studies

*Most of the time



▼ James McCord demonstrates a phone wiretap.

March 1974 Former Nixon administration officials are indicted on charges of conspiracy in the Watergate break-in. Richard Nixon is named as an "unindicted co-conspirator."

July 1974 The Supreme Court rules unanimously that Nixon must surrender all of the White House recordings requested by the new special prosecutor. The House Judiciary Committee recommends impeachment.

August 1974 Transcripts of tapes show that Nixon ordered a coverup of the Watergate break-in. On August 9, Nixon becomes first U.S. President to resign.

Why It Matters

While Watergate damaged the public's trust of government officials, the U.S. government's system of checks and balances withstood the crisis. Lawmakers passed laws to prevent similar abuses from happening. The role of the press in bringing the scandal to light reminded the public of the importance of a free press in a democratic society.

Journalists Bernstein (left) and Woodward (right) with *Washington Post* publisher Katharine Graham



Thinking Critically

How did Congress and the Supreme Court balance the role of the executive branch during the Watergate crisis?

History Interactive*

For: More information about Watergate
Web Code: nep-1802

Nixon Quits

Nixon and his family bid goodbye to Gerald and Betty Ford as they board a helicopter after Nixon's historic resignation.

Nixon refused to turn over these tapes to the special prosecutor investigating the scandal. The President justified withholding the tapes by claiming **executive privilege**. Executive privilege is the principle that the President has the right to keep certain information confidential. It took almost a year for the courts to sort out the matter. On July 24, 1974, in the case of *United States v. Nixon*, the Supreme Court disagreed that the tapes fell under the principle of executive privilege and ordered Nixon to turn them over. Chief Justice Warren Burger made it clear that the Court rejected Nixon's claim of executive privilege in this instance:

Primary Source

“The expectation of a President to the confidentiality of his conversations and correspondence . . . has all the values to which we accord deference for the privacy of all citizens. . . . But this presumptive privilege must be considered in light of our historic commitment to the rule of law [the principle that all citizens are bound by the same laws]. . . . The very integrity of the judicial system and public confidence in the system depend on full disclosure of all the facts, within the framework of the rules of evidence.”

—U.S. Supreme Court, *United States v. Nixon*, 1974

Nixon Resigns When investigators listened to the tapes, they found that crucial parts of the conversations were missing. Nixon claimed his secretary had mistakenly erased them. Still, the tapes provided enough evidence of Nixon's involvement in the coverup to lead the Judiciary Committee of the House of Representatives to vote to impeach the President. The committee charged Nixon with obstructing justice in the coverup of the Watergate break-in, misuse of power, and refusing to comply with House subpoenas.

A number of Republican committee members joined the Democrats in voting for impeachment.

Recognizing that the full House of Representatives would vote in favor of impeachment and that many Republicans would vote to convict him in a trial in the Senate, Nixon decided to resign. In a speech to the American public on August 8, 1974, Nixon informed the nation that he would step down the following day in the hope that he “will have hastened the start of that process of healing which is so desperately needed in America.” The long ordeal of Watergate had finally come to an end. With it, Nixon became the first and only President to resign the presidency.

Historians disagree about whether Nixon knew beforehand of the decision to burglarize Democratic Party headquarters. However, few doubt that he took part in the coverup. Testimony by his top aides, the Watergate tapes, and evidence gathered in the prosecution of the burglars all show that the President sought to quash the investigation.

Moreover, investigations revealed that Nixon had committed other abuses of presidential power. His reelection team had engaged in dirty tricks to secure his election. He had developed an “enemies list” and used federal agencies to go after his enemies. The President had ordered the FBI to place wiretaps on the telephones of those government employees and reporters he suspected of leaking information unfavorable to the administration.

Watergate Has a Lasting Impact In pursuit of personal power, Richard Nixon damaged the reputation of the



presidency and shook the public's confidence in government. One conservative commentator, formerly a supporter of Nixon, echoed the disillusionment of many Americans:

Primary Source “The lies, the lies, the lies! . . . What a pity, what a pity! Here was a President who got us out of Vietnam, ended the draft . . . and by his bold overtures to Red China opened new avenues toward world peace. Now the good vanishes in the wreckage of the bad. The swearing-in of Gerald Ford cant come one hour too soon.”

—James J. Kilpatrick, *National Review*, August 30, 1974

Polls revealed that from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s, the percentage of Americans who believed in the truth of government statements plummeted from 80 percent to 33 percent.

In the wake of Watergate, Congress enacted numerous reforms to try to restore the public's confidence in government and to prevent abuses of power in the future. It established a procedure for naming an independent counsel to investigate charges against the White House. The Federal Election Campaign Act of 1974 sought to limit the amount of money that individuals could give candidates, in order to prevent the corruption of the political process.

Yet, the Watergate affair also demonstrated that the nation could weather such a crisis. It showed the strength of the system of checks and balances. Both Congress and the Supreme Court had successfully checked the power of the President. According to *Time* magazine, Nixon's resignation represented an “extraordinary triumph of the American system.” Watergate demonstrated that no person, not even a President, is above the law. As Gerald Ford said when he became President: “Our great republic is a government of laws and not of men.”

 **Checkpoint** What role did Richard Nixon and his top aides play in the Watergate scandal?

Post-Watergate Government Reforms

Federal Election Campaign Act Amendments (1974)	Set limit on campaign contributions, provided partial federal funding for presidential campaigns, created the Federal Election Commission to enforce these laws
Freedom of Information Act Amendments (1974)	Penalized government officials who withheld documents illegally
Government in the Sunshine Act (1976)	Opened meetings of many government agencies to the public. By 1977, all states had passed sunshine laws.
Ethics in Government Act of 1978	Required financial disclosure forms from public officials, restricted government officials' ability to lobby, created the office of special prosecutor

A Breach of Faith

The laws and measures listed above were passed after Watergate to make government more transparent. *Do you think these laws helped to restore the public's faith in government? Explain.*

SECTION 1 Assessment

Progress Monitoring Online

For: Self-test with vocabulary practice
Web Code: nea-1803

Comprehension

- Terms and People** For each term below, write a sentence explaining its relationship to the domestic policy record of the Nixon administration.
 - silent majority
 - stagflation
 - affirmative action
 - Watergate
 - executive privilege

2. NoteTaking Reading Skill:

Identify Main Ideas Use your chart to answer the Section Focus Question: What events led to Richard Nixon's resignation as President in 1974?

Writing About History

3. Quick Write: Write a Resumé

Conduct research on Richard Nixon's life and career, and then create a resumé for the former President that lists his educational background, work experience, and any awards he received.

Critical Thinking

- Summarize** How did Nixon respond to the economic problems he faced as President?
- Synthesize Information** In the long run, how successful was Richard Nixon's southern strategy?
- Draw Inferences** Opinion polls taken before and after Watergate showed a sharp drop in people's confidence in government. List two other results of the scandal.

What Are the Limits of Executive Privilege?

The President's power to keep certain communications with his advisers confidential is called executive privilege. This power is based on the idea that members of the executive branch should be able to advise the President without worrying that their opinions will be revealed to other branches of government or to the public.

United States v. Nixon (1974)

The Facts	The Issue	The Decision
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Congressional investigation revealed that President Richard Nixon and his aides may have committed illegal acts.• Taped Oval Office conversations between President Nixon and his aides were sought as evidence.• President Nixon refused to surrender the tapes to the Department of Justice.	President Nixon argued that executive privilege gave him the absolute right to withhold the tapes from the Department of Justice.	The Supreme Court ruled that executive privilege has limits. They said that executive privilege could not protect the President from the judicial process. Nixon must surrender the tapes to prosecutors.



Why It Matters

Although not specifically granted by the Constitution, Presidents have long assumed that executive privilege is implied by the constitutional separation of powers. *United States v. Nixon* was the test case that allowed the Supreme Court to define executive privilege and to set limits on its use.

In his written opinion, Chief Justice Burger recognized that there is a need for confidentiality in the executive branch, particularly when “military, diplomatic or sensitive national security secrets” must be protected. Under those conditions, the President has the absolute right to keep communications confidential. However, communications between the President and his advisers often concern policy that has nothing to do with national security. In those cases, Burger said, executive privilege is limited. A judge can decide that there is overwhelming government interest in obtaining the President’s privileged communications. The due process of law in a criminal case is one example of overwhelming government interest.

A few days after the decision in *United States v. Nixon*, President Nixon resigned from office. The Court’s ruling had proved that the President is not above the law.

▲ In this cartoon, the executive and legislative branches fight for power. In *United States v. Nixon*, the judicial branch backed the legislative branch.

Connect to Your World

Consider the limits of executive privilege outlined in *United States v. Nixon*. During their respective terms in office, recent Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush have applied executive privilege in controversial situations. Research one example and then write a paragraph either defending or arguing against this use of executive privilege.

For: Supreme Court cases

Web Code: nee-1804