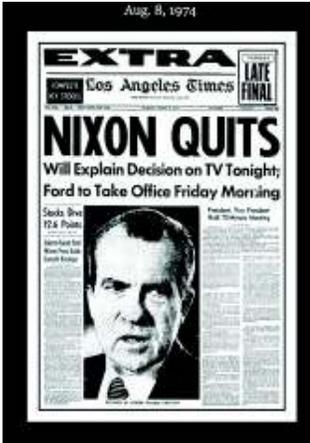


United States vs. Richard Nixon



Background of the Case

In 1972, President Richard Nixon was trying to win reelection. One of his campaign workers hired some men to break into the offices of the Democratic Party in Washington, D.C. The offices were in a group of buildings called the Watergate. The break-in and what followed became known as the Watergate scandal.

The Senate began to investigate the crime. So did a special prosecutor working in the Justice Department. They learned that some officials in the White House might have been involved. They also learned that the president had a taping system in his White House office. With this system, he had taped his conversations with aides. They thought that the tapes would show what the president and his aides had known about the crime. When they asked for the

tapes, though, the president refused to release them. He based his claim on what he called *executive privilege*. This is the right of a president to keep his conversations private.

The special prosecutor went to court, and a federal judge ordered President Nixon to turn over the tapes. Nixon refused. The case was appealed to the Supreme Court.

The Decision

Nixon's lawyers argued that executive privilege applied. They said presidents had to be able to protect the privacy of their conversations with top aides. The Court rejected this argument. Chief Justice Warren Burger wrote the decision. He said that the situation might be different if holding back the tapes was to protect "military, diplomatic or sensitive national security secrets." Claiming executive privilege for general discussions, though, "would upset the constitutional balance of a 'workable government.'"

Eight justices took part in the decision. They all agreed that the president had to turn over the tapes. Meanwhile, the House of Representatives had begun the process for impeaching Nixon. The president finally released the tapes, which revealed his role in the cover-up. He lost most of his remaining support in Congress. Four days later, he resigned from the office of president.

Why It Matters

United States v. Nixon made it clear that in the American system of government, even the most powerful person, the president, is not above the law and beyond the power of the courts.



Did you know that the Watergate Scandal was featured in the popular movie *Forrest Gump*? It was actually Gump who caught Nixon breaking into the Watergate Hotel to spy on the Democratic Party.