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Comparing two impeachments

In light of Thursday's vote in the US House of Representatives to formalize the impeachment inquiry against Donald Trump, it is worth contrasting the events now unfolding in Washington to those that led to the resignation of Richard Nixon 45 years ago.

In July 1974, the House of Representatives approved three articles of impeachment against Nixon. The direct cause of the impeachment was the Watergate scandal, in which Nixon directed a group of burglars known as the "White House Plumbers" to break into and wiretap the offices of the Democratic National Committee.



Members of the Senate Watergate Investigating committee in Washington, D.C., May 17, 1973 [Credit: AP Photo]

However, the impeachment inquiry unveiled a far broader range of crimes by the administration. Among the five articles of impeachment debated on the House floor was one that accused Nixon of “the submission to Congress of false and misleading statements concerning the existence, scope, and nature of American bombing operations in Cambodia” in connection to the Vietnam War.

Before Watergate, the first task of Nixon’s “plumbers” was to burglarize the office of Daniel Ellsberg’s psychiatrist. The aim was to discredit the man who released the Pentagon Papers, which documented that the White House “systematically lied, not only to the public but also to Congress,” about the conduct of the war.

This burglary, as one commentator noted, linked “Vietnam and Watergate in one continuous 1961-to-1975 story.”

“In 1973 the Senate Watergate Committee investigation revealed that the executive branch had directed national intelligence agencies to carry out constitutionally questionable domestic security operations,” notes the official history by the United States Senate. “In 1974 Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Seymour Hersh published a front-page *New York Times* article claiming that the CIA had been spying on anti-war activists for more than a decade, violating the agency’s charter.”

This led to the formation of the Church Committee, which investigated abuses by the CIA, NSA and FBI. Senator Frank Church, commenting on the committees’ findings, warned that the NSA has the capability “to make tyranny total in America, and we must see to it that this agency... operate[s] within the law and under proper supervision so that we never cross over that abyss.”

Twelve years later, another crisis erupted in Washington, which nearly led to the impeachment of Ronald Reagan, who was only saved by the unwillingness of the Democrats to remove him.

The crisis was triggered by the revelation that the Reagan administration had concocted a scheme to sell arms to Iran in order to buy weapons to finance an illegal war against the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. According to the CIA officer in charge of the covert war, the Contras routinely murdered “civilians and Sandinista officials in the provinces, as well as heads of cooperatives, nurses, doctors and judges.”

The investigation revealed that the Reagan administration flagrantly violated the Boland Amendment, passed by Congress to prohibit US government assistance to the Contras.

The Nixon impeachment inquiry and the Iran-Contra scandals involved vast crimes, rooted, fundamentally, in the prosecution of illegal wars in pursuit of predatory US policy interests. They exposed sweeping abuses of democratic rights, from the COINTELPRO operation exposed by the Church Committee, to the revelation of the Rex 84 plan for mass detention of “subversive” elements documented by the Iran-Contra hearings.

One need only review this history to see that the present impeachment hearing is the exact opposite of the investigation of Watergate and Iran-Contra. Instead of exposing and curbing the criminal activities of the US intelligence agencies and military, it is aimed at expanding and empowering them.

House speaker Nancy Pelosi summed up the basis of the impeachment inquiry as follows: “In one phone conversation, he [Trump] undermined our national security by withholding military assistance to a country [Ukraine] that has been voted on by the Congress of the United States—to the benefit of the Russians.”

Trump, as former CIA Director David Petraeus recently put it, stands accused of “holding up assistance that’s desperately needed by those who are on the front lines” of a war waged by the US-backed Ukrainian government against forces aligned with Russia. Petraeus added, “This is World War I... it's a very hot war still going on.”

The broad unpopularity of war abroad has created a crisis of legitimacy for the Democrats’ impeachment drive. As might be expected, the Democrats have not mobilized significant popular support on this basis. As *Times* columnist David Brooks wrote, “For most [Americans], impeachment is not a priority. It’s a dull background noise... the fundamental reality is that many Americans are indifferent.”

In fact, the Democrats’ impeachment inquiry has more in common with the impeachment of Bill Clinton by the Republicans, in which a concocted sexual scandal was used as a cover for a right-wing agenda.

From the outset, as the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, the Democrats’ opposition to Trump has had nothing in common with the popular opposition to his fascistic administration. It is one side in a conflict within the capitalist ruling class and the state, primarily over foreign policy questions.

From the day of Trump’s inauguration, when millions protested across the country, the Democratic Party has worked to contain popular anger and channel it behind a pro-war agenda. It has sought to suppress opposition to Trump’s fascistic assault on immigrants,

his moves toward dictatorship, his praise for neo-Nazis, his tax cuts for the rich and his attacks on social programs for workers and poor people.

The Democrats are neither able to nor willing to make any democratic appeal to the popular hatred of Trump. Having long ago abandoned any program of social reform directed toward the working class, the Democratic Party has evolved into an organization based on an alliance of the intelligence agencies, sections of finance and the affluent upper-middle class.

The current impeachment drive has no progressive or democratic content. The Democrats are attempting to impeach Trump on false pretenses, concealing their real objectives. It has all the elements, in other words, of a palace coup.

As the Socialist Equality Party Political Committee wrote in its [statement](#) posted October 14, “No to American fascism! Build a mass movement to force Trump out!”:

So long as the conflict is confined to the divisions within the ruling class, there can be no democratic or progressive outcome. Should the impeachment drive of the Democrats fail, it will strengthen Trump’s political position. Should it succeed, it will elevate Trump’s factotum, Mike Pence, to the presidency. Moreover, impeachment will actually strengthen the political influence of the CIA and FBI over the White House. It will legitimize a foreign policy based on an anti-Russia hysteria that will justify a dangerous confrontation with a nuclear-armed power. Either outcome represents an immense danger to the working class.

The fight against Trump can only take a progressive character to the extent that is completely separate from, and hostile to, the palace coup being orchestrated by the Democrats on behalf of the intelligence agencies and the military.

It must be conducted by the working class through the expansion of the class struggle against war, dictatorship and social inequality. It must be informed by a conscious struggle to put an end to capitalism, the source of war and inequality, and establish a socialist society.

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