Public Disgrace: Methods and Philosophies of Managing American Presidential Scandals

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Table of Contents

Introduction....................................................................................................................................2

Corruption and Indiscretion: the Election of 1884.................................................................7

"Corrupt Bargain": A Phantom Scandal.......................................................................................11

Scandals of Abraham Lincoln: Insufficiently White Supremacist........................................15

Scandals of Richard Nixon: Funding and Watergate..............................................................19

Conclusion...................................................................................................................................24

Bibliography.................................................................................................................................27
The study of political science is often seen as a study of political movements and mechanisms; more concerned with the patterns and statistics of human activity than with the basic human elements. But, ultimately, politics is a human construction, and any human construction is shaped by the human beings who created it and participate in it. Nowhere, perhaps, is this more apparent than in the idea of scandal, of a political secret whose potential to destabilize or alter politics at large comes entirely from its ability to damage a political figure's reputation.

Scandal's power has been with us for most of history. Ancient sources as varied as the Hebrew Bible, the Histories of Herodotus, and the records of Chinese and Mesoamerican civilizations all report states and communities large and small rocked by dark secrets brought to light. Studies of chimpanzee populations reveal even our close primate ancestors engage in perfidy and deception, and can get themselves into trouble if discovered in misbehavior. Scandals have existed in broad multitudes of political organizations, whether communal or statist, authoritarian or liberal, democratic, despotic, or aristocratic, militarist or peaceable. They can be found in religiously tolerant, restrictive, or even atheistic societies. The substance might be different, shaped by their values and ideals, but not the fact of their existence.

And because scandals are so widespread, so too are the familiar methods of attempting to manage them. Some figures simply opt for denial, refusing to acknowledge the validity of these scandals and working to marginalize their sources. Others prefer to "get out in front" of them, either by means of public apologies attempting to win sympathy or, sometimes, by brazen and
open admission, hoping to project strength through audacity and render the scandal's power impotent. Willing or unwilling scapegoats might be found, figures on whom blame can be placed. A popular choice in modern times is simply ducking out of public view for a few months or years, waiting for it to "blow over" and public outrage to run its course and memories to fade, new distractions to be found. And sometimes a simple blitz of good publicity, in the form of either personal appeals or military or policy successes, can bury scandal in the minds of the public.

The intent of this paper is to look over historical scandals, and to determine, as best as such a thing can be determined, which methods of controlling the fallout of a scandal work and under which circumstances. This might sound like a nihilistic goal, but even politicians who seek to serve the public good can fall victim to scandal, and if destroyed in the court of public opinion they will not be able to achieve good aims. In the end, a public figure can only make their ideas into reality if they have the power to do so.

Because of the great breadth of the subject matter that this paper must set and acknowledge some limitations on its scope. First, it will chiefly analyze and examine political scandals in the government and history of the executive branch of a relatively young democracy: the United States of America. This leaves a great deal of ground uncovered: the politics and scandals of a feudal or authoritarian state will necessarily be very different simply because of the different mechanics of their government structures, deemphasizing the role of popular opinion and emphasizing the thoughts and opinions of ones' peers and class. Many historical societies would find the idea of a civilian who had never seen combat or commanded troops controlling the military, in the truest sense of the word, scandalous. This is an interesting and obvious avenue
of research, and in modern times the ways in which even popular scandals can destabilize authoritarian states is a growing area of interest, but it is sadly beyond the scope of this paper.

It also means that these scandals will reflect the values and attitudes of the United States, and therefore will differ significantly from those even of other democracies. Just for example, the democratic nations of France and Japan on either side of America's coasts each possess democratic governments and constitutions generally seen as somewhat inspired by the American model, yet each has radically different attitudes that inform their scandal cultures. It is commonly claimed, for example, that the French have a more relaxed attitude towards sexuality that would be scandalous in America, while the Japanese instead see America as sexually liberated and licentious. Whether or not these opinions and stereotypes are true is a worthy area of study, but it is not what this paper seeks to investigate. For better or worse, the writer of this paper is an American, and is most familiar with the history and cultural attitudes of his own country.

Finally, the executive branch is, while a large limb of the American political body, still just a limb. There is great room to look at other important parts of the American political system, whether in other branches of Federal government, state and local level officials, or even important NGO and activist organizations not directly holding office. But, ultimately, the President of the executive branch is one of the few officials directly elected on a national level, and therefore one of the few such positions that allows scholarship to focus on America as a whole rather than attempt to recreate unique state and local conditions at each step.

Also, before the meat of discussion begins, definitions should be provided for some basic terminology. Throughout, this paper will attempt to divide scandals into two broad categories: "personal" and "professional" scandals. A "personal" scandal is a violation of commonly-held
ethics in the political figure's private life. The popular and lurid sexual scandal or closeted orientation or dysphoria becoming public are the obvious ones that spring to mind, but this can also cover serious criminal allegations or dishonesty about past deeds. A "professional" scandal refers to improprieties or failures directly related to the figure's position, such as embezzlement, corruption, cronyism, or gross incompetence performed while in power. There are also grey areas where scandals can potentially encompass both. Sometimes, one dimension or the other only exists as a result of self-serving definitions; for example, the "Lavender Scare" gave a personal scandal political dimensions by claiming that homosexual men needed to be purged from government on the grounds that they would be easier for foreign powers to manipulate, but ignored that this potential manipulation only existed because government and public persecution of their orientation made it a secret worth hiding. But other times the description is purely factual, as when William "Boss" Tweed was revealed to be using his twin careers in organized crime and New York City politics to feed one another's success, or when a figure is revealed to have falsified and lied about their academic credentials or personal experiences, calling both their honesty and competence into question.

Now, onto the facts of the case. First, this paper will examine perhaps the most scandal-defined election in American presidential history, the fractious and narrow contest of Grover Cleveland against James Blaine in 1884. Grover Cleveland's campaign had to deal with an ugly personal scandal, the allegation that he had fathered a child out of wedlock and the resulting public hysteria and sensationalized distortion, while Blaine's had to manage a staggering record of public corruption in a messy array of professional scandals. Second, this paper will look at the famous "corrupt bargain" following the first election in which the general public (or at least,
the white male public) was allowed to vote in 1824, an interesting case in which the appearance of scandal was enough to create a massive political backlash, destabilizing the presidency of John Quincy Adams and paving the way for Jacksonian democracy, due to a mixture of factors that seemingly created public confusion as to what had occurred and the failure of the Adams administration to properly address it. Third, Lincoln was dogged for most of his political career with potentially-ruinous allegations regarding his degree of commitment to opposing slavery and white supremacy - namely, that he was an abolitionist and egalitarian who supported the mixing of the races, and all of which he had to disavow at various times to remain a viable candidate and politician. Finally, perhaps no discussion of American political scandal could be complete without a look at the Nixon presidency's second term, including the fallout of the Watergate break in, and the Ford administration that was irreversibly tainted by Ford's decision to pardon the outgoing president, as a study in failure.

At each point, the case will be examined, through a mixture of primary sources and modern scholarship, in an attempt to ensure the information is factual. Then, analysis will be attempted, looking at the nature of the scandal or scandals, the methods undertaken by the politicians involved to work around them, and their effectiveness at a national level. Perhaps response will be divided along existing regional, ethnic, ideological, or partisan lines; in this case the paper will attempt to broadly outline what these lines are by examining, if in brief, where the fractures exist. Each time, the nature of the scandal as personal, professional, or having elements of both will be analyzed, so as to see whether or not the methods that serve one will serve another. Finally, hopefully, a conclusion will be reached regarding what methods are best for
addressing which types of American scandals, and how to come out the other side with the politician's power and prestige intact.

Corruption and Indiscretion: the Election of 1884

Although the Election of 1884 is not, perhaps, as famous as, say, the fateful election of 1860 that plunged the nation into bloody civil war in the history of the United States, it is nonetheless infamous among students of American history. One of the last elections of the Gilded Age, the Election of 1884, while contested over legitimate policy differences, is primarily remembered for campaigning defined by ugly mudslinging. Although modern scholarship has called into question the degree to which such parades of disgrace totally drowned out substantive political debate during the election itself\(^1\), the public memory of this election remembers mostly the two opposing candidates, relative newcomer Grover Cleveland and perennial presidential hopeful James G. Blaine, and their respective struggles with personal and professional scandals.

This period in American history was no stranger to political corruption. Under the "patronage" or "spoils system," government posts and the comfortable paychecks, bribes, and political power that came with them, were awarded to friends and families of political office-

holders following elections. This practice was somewhat-controversial when, four years earlier, President Garfield had been slain by a mentally-ill assassin who believed himself entitled to a government job, sparking public outrage and ultimately driving the passage of the Pendleton Act to create a basis for testing job candidates for merit rather than loyalty. Although the law initially only applied to a small number of jobs, it was understood that incoming presidents could expand its scope, using it to purge positions held by opposing party members and in the process create a true civil service. Graft was also a frequent charge laid against many political figures, with large companies in an industrializing America often billing the American government for more than their labor was worth, paying some of the proceeds as discounted stock or outright bribes to government officials and pocketing the rest. The second term of the Grant presidency had famously collapsed under scandals surrounding such activities among the president's cabinet.

And it was in this climate that James G. Blaine had been embroiled for more than a decade in professional scandals involving the railroads. In 1872, while serving as Republican Speaker of the House, he was implicated in the Crédit Mobilier scandal, involving the Union Pacific Railroad company that built the Transcontinental Railroad overcharging the government for the project, pocketing the difference, and paying select officials discounted stock to overlook what they had done. At the time, Blaine was able to avoid serious consequences, largely by staunch

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5 Muzzey, 68-69.
denial and lack of evidence. This scandal coexisted with the final years of the Grant presidency, perhaps lending some further protection from scrutiny. In 1876, he was again visited by allegations that the Union Pacific Railroad company had bribed him, by purchasing nearly-worthless stock for many times its alleged value. While at first, Blaine once again attempted staunch denial, a clerk named James Mulligan came forward, claiming to have arranged the transaction and having kept the letters to prove it. They ended, famously, with "Kindly burn this letter," and while Blaine was able to acquire the letters and prevent their contents becoming public knowledge, the backlash almost certainly narrowly prevented the Republican party from nominating him for president that year, as anti-Blaine factions united to shut him out. (Ironically, the 1876 election would prove one of the most contentious in American history.) When he was finally nominated in 1884, it was at the head of a fractured and factionalized Republican party, many of whom were activated primarily by opposition to political corruption. And shortly into the campaign, when the allegations of railroad corruption resurfaced, new correspondance emerged that made his ongoing tactic of persistent denial and dismissal of the scandal as slander less plausible.

Conversely, Grover Cleveland was selected to head the Democratic ticket on a record of personal and professional integrity, having worked to dismantle political machines and institute

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6 Muzzey, 83-85.


8 Summers, 63-65.

9 Muzzey, 281-285.

10 Muzzey, 301-305.
anti-corruption measures and civil-service reforms at the state and local level in New York.\textsuperscript{11} However, Republican operatives were able to dig up a messy personal scandal in his past during the election, namely that he had fathered a child out of wedlock with a woman named Maria Halpin.\textsuperscript{12} Cleveland faced this scandal by trying to make a show of personal honesty, instructing his followers to "Above all, tell the truth," and admitting that he had paid her child support, claiming that she had been with himself and several other men, and that he did not know whether the child was his, but had felt obligated to pay since he was the only bachelor among them.\textsuperscript{13} Halpin, for her part, denied being with other men and claimed in an affidavit that Cleveland had had sex with her forcefully, that he had threatened to ruin her if she went to the authorities, and that, after she gave birth, was committed unlawfully to an asylum for a few days despite showing no signs of mental illness for the purpose of separating her from her child, who was then adopted by someone else.\textsuperscript{14}

Although the voters of the time did not seem to totally believe Cleveland, his approach and damage control at least prevented a mass exodus of voters from the Democratic party, and the race seemed to narrow to a handful of key swing states, most prominently New York. The Republican coalition was vulnerable due to factionalism, most famously because of "Mugwumps," intensely anti-corruption focused activists who had opposed Blaine's nomination and openly threatened that they were more concerned with Blaine's reputation for favor-trading

\textsuperscript{11} Summers, 116-122.
\textsuperscript{12} Summers, 181-184.
\textsuperscript{13} Summers, 183-184.
\textsuperscript{14} Summers, 183.
and graft than with Cleveland's messy personal life in a race for public office.\textsuperscript{15} In the last few weeks of the campaign, a pro-Blaine minister, Dr. Samuel Burchard, attempted to scold the "Mugwumps" at a public event for siding with the Democrats, which he termed the party of "rum, Romanism, and rebellion."\textsuperscript{16} While the anti-Catholic slur went initially unnoticed, it was caught and spread by Democratic operatives, and Blaine chose to ignore the backlash rather than publicly disown Burchard, alienating many Irish Catholic voters.\textsuperscript{17} In such a tight race, where New York was ultimately decided by a few thousand voters, this is seen as costing Blaine the presidency.

This election also coincided with a changing American media landscape. Pulitzer's famous \textit{New York World} started circulation in 1883, and national news was a hot commodity. In an election where both candidates produced interesting and detailed scandals, damage control was key, and the younger, more plugged-in Cleveland ultimately dealt with it better than Blaine, who was more used to an older, slower news cycle. While Blaine did make some breaks with tradition, including taking a more active role in his campaign, they were ultimately not enough, nor responsive enough, to head off anti-corruption sentiments his campaign seemed to run counter towards.

\textsuperscript{15} Muzzey, 287-293.

\textsuperscript{16} Summers, 281.

\textsuperscript{17} Summers, 281-285.
"Corrupt Bargain": A Phantom Scandal

The one-term presidency of John Quincy Adams was destroyed by success from the very beginning in the election of 1824. It also arguably defined politics for a generation, and resulted in the fragmentation of the Democratic-Republican party into factions, ending the effective one-party rule, and ushering in a new era defined by either adherence or opposition to the figure of Andrew Jackson, who lost. And at the heart of it all, a complicated and opaque series of electoral processes that created the appearance of wrongdoing, tarnishing the Quincy Adams presidency as the product of a "Corrupt Bargain."

Because the Democratic-Republican party had absorbed the Federalist party and created a de-facto one-party state half a decade before, America had enjoyed a period of relaxed partisanship often called the "Era of Good Feelings" for some time. No less than four viable candidates ran in the election of 1824, a rarity in the history of the American political system specifically and of British-style, winner-take-all electoral systems generally. Coalitions were divided among geographic lines, with John Quincy Adams dominating New England, Henry Clay winning many western states such as his home of Kentucky, and Crawford contesting several southern states, including his home state of Georgia.\(^\text{18}\) Andrew Jackson had a broad coalition that secured him votes in the mid-Atlantic states, and contested both Clay and Crawford in the west and south respectively, helped by having southern leader John C. Calhoun, who

opposed nearly all of Adams's policies, forced into the position of both his and Jackson's running mate by a quirk of the electoral process.  

After the election, while Jackson had a plurality of both popular and electoral votes (43% and 38%, respectively), he did not win by a sufficient margin to achieve a majority and become President. (Adams, for instance, had 32% and 31%, Crawford 16% and 13%, and Clay 14% and 13%.) As per the Twelfth Amendment and Constitutional guidelines, a second, contingent election was held in the House of Representatives, with only the top three candidates up for consideration, eliminating Clay. As if to compound the issue, Crawford suffered a personal health crisis, having suffered a stroke in 1823 that left him paralyzed and nearly blind. This left Clay, who could no longer win and was Speaker of the House, in a position to play kingmaker. Clay's policy opinions aligned much more with Adams's than Jackson's, and he personally disliked Jackson besides, viewing Jackson as a unqualified celebrity war hero with little experience in government at best and a demagogue who represented a dangerous step towards stratocracy at worst. Between that and Crawford's poor health, the choice was obvious, and he used his personal influence to throw support behind John Quincy Adams, who won on the first ballot and became President of the United States.

This caused outrage to Jackson personally and many of his supporters, who had expected the candidate with the largest plurality of votes to become President after the contingent election. Allegations were made that Adams had essentially bought the presidency by offering Clay the

19 Marquis.


21 Marquis; Stenberg 61-64.
position of Secretary of State, then widely seen as a major stepping stone to the presidency, if Clay would support him in the House. Adams didn't help his case by promptly doing so, nor Clay his by accepting, arguing that refusing the position wouldn't help quell the rumors anyway. They tried to deal with the scandal by ignoring it and getting on with business, hoping that solid results would silence critics and douse the firestorm. But they judged wrong. The Jacksonian coalition undermined the Adams presidency from the beginning, attacking its legitimacy and preventing it from enacting many of its policy decisions. Eventually, the scandal became self-sustaining, and the political myth of the "corrupt bargain" activated voters basically everywhere but Adams's native New England states in both the midterm and 1828 presidential election, both marked by ugly mudslinging on both sides. This eventually fractured the Democratic-Republican party, recreating a two-party system in America.

This begs the question, why didn't John Quincy Adams directly attack the allegations and attempt to squash the supposed scandal before it grew out of his control? Until the election of 1884, most presidential campaigns were conducted through proxies and volunteers, with the candidates trying to present themselves as above the fray, projecting disinterest. Adams seemingly hoped that by following this tradition, and the example of earlier Presidents like George Washington, he could silence critics. He perhaps also did not fully understand the degree to which the Jacksonian faction was organizing into what would become the modern Democratic

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22 Marquis; Stenberg 64-68.

23 Marquis; Stenberg 63-65.

24 Marquis.

25 Marquis.
party. While his own faction made some efforts to properly organize and create an information-dissemination apparatus, he never fully devoted his energy to it.\textsuperscript{26} Perhaps this is because Adams was a rather unsocial person, and concentrating on a public relations crisis did not come easily to him.\textsuperscript{27} In short, he was stuck in the old way of conducting politics and campaigns.

Jackson also enjoyed a powerful initial advantage regarding scandals in that he did not enter the political fray with a public service record. Although this meant many, like Clay, felt he was unqualified for the position, it also meant he could not only campaign as a political outsider but freely attack all sorts of government projects as corrupt without worrying that that corruption would reflect poorly on himself. Finally, the election coincided with an ongoing movement towards universal male suffrage across most American states, an issue Jackson campaigned on throughout his political career. While this ultimately helped strengthen American democracy and served as a bridge towards truly democratic government, it also meant that many voters were comparatively less informed and educated than they had been in the past. It delegitimized Adams's election on a complicated technicality and lent credence to Jackson's intuitively-obvious claim that, as the one who had entered the contingent election with a plurality, he deserved the win.\textsuperscript{28} Adams's failure to deal with the supposed scandal seems ultimately to have been part of a broader pattern of a failure to adapt to the new realities of changing times and political landscapes. A swifter, more wide-reaching defense of his presidency's legitimacy might've saved him where trying to project strength failed.

\textsuperscript{26} Marquis.

\textsuperscript{27} Marquis.

\textsuperscript{28} Marquis.
Scandals of Abraham Lincoln: Insufficiently White Supremacist

Today, Abraham Lincoln is well-known and respected as the president who ended the institution of slavery in the United States. However, for much of Lincoln's political career, abolition, that is, the immediate granting of freedoms to all slaves, was a minority political position, and for virtually all it he had to deal with a voting base that was, by virtually any modern standard, almost entirely composed of white supremacists. Like many progressive politicians in history, Lincoln was willing to lie about and distort his degree of commitment to progressive causes in order to see them properly come to fruition against an obstinate status quo, and in the process successfully moved the Overton Window of the northern states against the institution of slavery.

For most of the mid-nineteenth century, slavery was as touchy and politically fraught an issue as any modern partisan conflict. It obviously tied into regional factions, with the economies
and societies of the southern and eastern states built on the practice even as northern and western states outlawed it and attempted to prevent its expansion into newly-incorporated territories. Most of the bitterest Federal legislative clashes and compromises of this time period, including multiple instances of open violence on the floor of the Senate and Congress, were in some way tied to the institution. However, this did not make northern voters racial egalitarians. Indeed, at least some of their distaste for the practice was explicitly based in the close proximity it brought people of different races together, and a proposed solution was a mixture of compensated emancipation, that is, respecting Southern slave owners' property rights by enacting a system to financially compensate them for their enslaved peoples freedom over time, giving the economy time to transition away from slavery, and abolition was a fairly minority position, though one that grew more popular with time. It was also popularly hoped that these newly-freed people of African descent would then be mass-migrated, forcibly or otherwise, to Africa, where they would become part of the new colony of Liberia.

Lincoln was, like most politicians, not in the habit of running on a single-issue, but he *did* run on a broadly anti-slavery platform throughout his career. This opened him up to attack on the grounds of insufficient fidelity to white supremacy and that he was in favor of "amalgamation," that is racial mixing, both charges openly made by Stephen Douglas during their famous series of

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debates.\textsuperscript{31} His working relationship with Frederick Douglass, the famous escaped slave, orator, and political advocate against the institution of slavery, was another potential vector for assault in this vein.\textsuperscript{32} And these rumors persisted well into his presidency.

Lincoln's strategy to respond to these attacks was actually fairly stable for much of his career. He would admit to \textit{some} progressive views, such as believing that people of other races deserved some rights and protections under the law, but place clearly proscribed boundaries around those rights. For instance, during the first Lincoln-Douglas debate, he openly admitted to hoping that freed slaves might be moved out of the United States and repatriated to the African colony of Liberia, and made it repeatedly clear that he did not support full rights for non-white Americans, insinuating that Douglas was taking innocuous comments out of context to make him look like someone in favor of equality and mixed-race marriage.\textsuperscript{33} Famously, he also wrote a public letter to anti-slavery newspaper editor Horace Greeley during the early parts of his presidency and the American civil war being fought over slavery, in which he declared that his primary objective in the conflict was to preserve the United States as a nation, and that he would take whichever position on the issue of slavery he felt would do that, regardless of his personal feelings that all men should be free.\textsuperscript{34} Lincoln directly addressed many critics, tearing through attempts to dogwhistle on racial issues to openly acknowledge and clarify his positions.\textsuperscript{35} Even


\textsuperscript{32} “Third Debate”

\textsuperscript{33} “First Debate”


\textsuperscript{35} Nagler.
when he ultimately introduced the Emancipation Proclamation, a military order issued as commander-in-chief for the Union army declaring all enslaved peoples in rebellious territories free, military units of free African American soldiers, and then the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution outlawing the practice of slavery, he was careful to couch these arguments as much as military acts meant to secure victory in the Civil War as based in high-minded sentiment.\textsuperscript{36}

While full understanding all of Lincoln's private feelings is probably impossible, it is important to note that not all of those statements were completely true. For instance, at the time he wrote the famous Greeley letter, he already had an early draft of the Emancipation Proclamation in his desk, and was awaiting a big military victory to announce it.\textsuperscript{37} And though at least some modern scholarship suggests that Lincoln's views on race evolved and changed throughout his life, he did essentially phase out rhetoric regarding positions like repatriating freed peoples of color to other nations as his career continued rather than holding consistent to them once the public seemed less hostile to more progressive ideas.\textsuperscript{38} Finally, while Frederick Douglass was often critical of Lincoln's unwillingness to openly commit to abolitionism, he also frequently commented in his writings that he felt treated as an equal by Lincoln privately, and Lincoln openly invited him along with a delegation of other African American intellectuals to the White House, the second such visit ever recorded.\textsuperscript{39}

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\textsuperscript{36} Nagler. \\
\textsuperscript{37} "Letter to Horace Greeley." \\
\textsuperscript{38} Nagler. \\
\textsuperscript{39} Nagler.
\end{flushright}
Whether these measures were effective is debatable. Indeed, the South rose in open rebellion upon his being elected President, before he was even inaugurated or had a chance to make any policies, so his measured stances did not bridge that gap. But, while the accusations of excessive sympathy to African Americans never truly went away, his method of directly addressing these scandals, clarifying his positions and presenting them in a less-controversial way, did ultimately make Lincoln a palatable enough candidate among Northern voters that he was successfully elected President twice, even as he moved in an increasingly abolitionist direction on the issue of slavery. The strategy worked well enough that he was able to make once-scandalous positions seem less scandalous.
No discussion of American Presidential scandals could be complete without looking at the famous 1972 break-in at the Watergate Hotel in Washington, DC by political operatives ultimately in the service of the Nixon administration who intended to bug a rival political party's campaign offices. To this day an American byword for scandal of any sort, the Watergate affair finally destroyed the controversial political career of Richard Nixon, and its impact on the American psyche has been examined for the better part of fifty years. More than any of his policy achievements or administrative actions, Nixon's presidential legacy is defined by scandal to a degree unmatched by virtually any other president.

Importantly, for the purposes of analysis, this was not the first major professional scandal Richard Nixon had to weather. Twenty years earlier, in 1952, he was accused of financial improprieties relating to an election fund during his time as a senator, shortly after he was made the running mate on Dwight Eisenhower's presidential ticket. Amidst calls for him to resign, and considerations from the Republican National Committee to demand the same, Nixon instead temporarily suspended his campaign and delivered a televised speech appealing directly to the American people, asserting his side of the story, directly addressing and dismissing the charges, and making personal appeals based on his life in public service. This so-called "Checkers speech," so named because he mentioned had received a dog as a gift from an admirer that his children had named Checkers, was an immediate success, and a sign of the power the new medium of television held to galvanize the voting public, as messages poured into the RNC from

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41 Mattson, 143-145.
all over America supporting him.\textsuperscript{42} This quick, vital response probably saved his career, and while the positive response was not uniform, with many dismissing it as emotionally manipulative and performative,\textsuperscript{43} it shows that Nixon was not incapable of managing dangerous scandals.

And Watergate was indeed a very dangerous scandal. Concurrent investigation into the break-in by both the FBI and the press revealed that Nixon had illegally or quasi-legally abused the power of his office during the last year of his presidency, using government agencies as weapons to attack domestic political opponents, compiling "enemies lists" of those he viewed as obstacles, and creating an unofficial private intelligence service, the "White House Plumbers."\textsuperscript{44} Originally intended simply to prevent leaks after the Pentagon Papers were released to the public by Daniel Ellsberg, the Plumbers had quickly descended into illegal and shady behavior, including using illegally-obtained information to discredit political enemies, especially psychological information, witness intimidation to help campaign donors, and even outright assault.\textsuperscript{45} They had used these means to tamper with the Democratic nomination, since Nixon was confident he could beat McGovern.

This time, Nixon's original strategy was to try to cover-up, first by attempting to conceal his connection to the burglars, then by firing the aides who had supervised the Plumbers and

\textsuperscript{42} Mattson, 151-157.

\textsuperscript{43} Mattson, 175.


\textsuperscript{45} Convard and Frankignoulle; Hersh.
paying off the burglars when the investigation got closer to the White House. Famously, the press played an important role in this process by keeping the Watergate story in the news, and publishing leaks from an internal source, later revealed to be FBI director Mark Felt. When a 1973 Senate inquiry into the scandal revealed that Nixon had installed a system to record and tape all his conversations, Nixon first refused to hand over the tapes to the Senate and Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox, citing executive privilege and national security concerns. After Archibald Cox subpoenaed the tapes, Nixon ordered him fired, then accepted the resignations of both Attorney General Elliot Richardson and his deputy when they refused the order in a bit of drama that became known as the "Saturday Night Massacre." This created a Constitutional crisis, triggering nationwide outrage, and when the Supreme Court ordered the tapes handed over, they not only confirmed Nixon's guilt but tarnished his reputation still further, revealing his private tendencies towards extreme profanity and racist, anti-Semitic diatribes, adding a personal dimension to the previously-professional scandal. In the end, with impeachment seemingly certain, Nixon resigned the office in 1974. He was pardoned by Gerald Ford, his former Vice President, generating even more outrage and ensuring the public displeasure with Nixon's

46 Convard and Frankignoule.


48 "Watergate and the Constitution."

49 Convard and Frankignoule; "Watergate and the Constitution."

50 Convard and Frankignoule; Hersh.
scandals would taint Ford as well. Nixon's political career never recovered, outside of a few advisory friendships with later Presidents.\textsuperscript{51}

During the investigation, Nixon made several attempts to try to salvage his reputation with the American people, including a famous 1973 speech during the struggle for the tapes in which he publicly declared that the American people had the right to know if their leaders were crooks and that he was not one.\textsuperscript{52} However, dealing with the scandal consumed much of his time, and reduced his effectiveness as president.\textsuperscript{53} In addition, the optics of his attempts at containment were consistently poor. Like the "Checkers speech," many of his public appearances involved him berating his political enemies, which became increasingly alienating to the public as his guilt seemed more and more sure.\textsuperscript{54} While refusing to release the full tapes, he offered heavily-redacted transcripts, even suggesting Senator John Stennis, a partially-deaf Nixon supporter, could listen to the unredacted tapes and verify them.\textsuperscript{55} Worse, his original Vice President, Spiro Agnew, resigned on unrelated charges of bribery and tax evasion during this time and was replaced with Ford, making Nixon's White House look even grimier.\textsuperscript{56} And in general, Nixon's harshest critics were the era's counterculture who already disliked him for his record as an anti-communist crusader and his public disparagement of their rejection of traditional American ways

\textsuperscript{51} Hersh.

\textsuperscript{52} Convard and Frankignoulle.

\textsuperscript{53} Hersh.

\textsuperscript{54} Hersh.

\textsuperscript{55} "Watergate and the Constitution."

\textsuperscript{56} Convard and Frankignoulle.
of life. The turbulence of the third quarter of the twentieth century had primed many Americans to question and reject authority, following the civil rights movement and the scarring war in Vietnam; the reveal of such high-level government abuse of power undermined his position and strengthened his critics'.

The obvious question is whether or not any strategy could have salvaged the Nixon presidency in light of the severity of the revelations made after Watergate, whether or not he was doomed to political disgrace from the moment the depth breadth of his transgressions came to light. As with so many things surrounding President Nixon, it's a complicated and difficult topic of discussion. But whether or not his downfall could have been prevented, it can be confidently stated that his heavy-handed and public efforts to obstruct the investigation succeeded in convicting him in the court of public opinion. The difference between the newly-elected Senator who connected with Americans over a new medium and the experienced President who turned high popularity ratings into a total rejection of his administration is not just that the former had reason to believe he'd done nothing wrong and the latter was all too aware that he had, but that as President, Nixon had enough rope to hang himself. Shades of the disgust for political enemies that characterized both the events that led to and his response to Watergate are obvious even within the "Checkers speech." Furthermore, part of the success of the "Checkers speech" involved reaching out through the new medium of television to connect with Americans in a new way, moving with the times, while Nixon's response to Watergate was mired in an old-fashioned view of executive power in the face of a newer status quo more likely to question authority and

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57 Hersh.
suspicious of government overreach. Even if the Nixon presidency couldn't've been saved, perhaps his post-presidency could have been if his tactics had been different.

Conclusion

Having examined these major federal-level scandals, what conclusions can be drawn?

First, and most importantly, being innocent (or at least able to credibly claim innocence) isn't a perfect defense, but it helps. Cleveland's ability to present a viable counter-narrative to the accusations against him might not've totally cleared up his sex scandal, but it provided enough
plausible deniability that many people voting for him weren't too troubled by their conscience, compared to Blaine's inability to ever fully shake allegations of corruption and bribery throughout his career, and a major difference between Nixon's political funding scandal while running as Vice President and his Watergate scandal while president was in the former case he could easily say he'd committed no illegal act or wrongdoing. However, innocence isn't a perfect defense: the "corrupt bargain" might've been anything but, yet the John Quincy Adams's presidency was sunk by it all the same. And guilt doesn't mean punishment is sure; while a modern scholar can't examine Lincoln's inner thoughts and see for certain the degree of his commitment to white supremacy, his opponents were not wrong when they accused him of being progressive on the issues of race and slavery by some standards of his time.

Second, the scandal should be acknowledged and addressed, whether through admissions of guilt or through credible counter-narratives. Once again, list are Quincy Adams and Blaine, both of whom tried to project themselves as being above the partisan fray, and in the process gave their enemies free reign. Comparatively, Lincoln and Cleveland both essentially confessed to lesser scandals to avoid being tarred with (being in favor of some rights for African Americans versus supporting egalitarianism and racially-mixed marriages, and having had an affair with a woman whose child he made financial provisions for as opposed to having raped her and abandoned her with a child out of wedlock, respectively), and found success in doing so. Nixon found some success in his funding scandal by blaming it on his political enemies, but the Watergate affair sank because he kept trying to do so long after it was becoming increasingly clear that it wasn't true, especially in light of his heavy-handed attempts to stifle the investigation.
Third, and frustratingly less-tangibly, a major element is being willing to move with the times rather than sticking solely to tried-and-true political methods. Quincy Adams and Blaine both lost control of their narratives in part because they were hearkening back to older styles of political campaigning, while Jackson, Cleveland, and Nixon during the funding scandal modernized and made use of more advanced methods of organization and information dissemination. Reading the modern political environment was an important factor too, such as the anti-corruption sentiment in 1884, rising tides of populism and general franchise in 1824, stiff white supremacist feelings throughout Lincoln's career, and growing anti-establishment cynicism during Nixon's. In particular, Lincoln was able to skillfully read his voting base and present anti-racist policies in a way they found palatable, such as couching them as useful war aims, while Nixon failed to do so and in the process was brought down.

Much hay has been made of the effects of new media and new scandals in the modern era, and certainly the speed with which information can be spread and disseminated is at an all-time high, and has had a tremendous effect on human life and human thought. But while the forms scandal can take and the ears they can reach might be different, the nature of scandal and our human reactions to it remain the same. Indeed, changing political conditions and political thought have existed for all of human history, and have bedeviled political figures trying to adapt to new environments for virtually all of American history. Ours is hardly the first post-industrial generation to see new technology radically change the way we live, and in prior generations, political figures managed to overcome these challenges just as modern ones can. Just as scandal may always have been and always will be with us, so too has and will change.
Bibliography

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