

Opinion **US politics & policy**

America is two nations barely on speaking terms

The spirit of Watergate will be missing from audiences for the televised January 6 hearings

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The Watergate hearings led to Nixon's resignation, but Donald Trump's supporters are already branding the inquiry into the January 6 Capitol Hill riot a witch hunt © FT montage/Reuters/AFP/Getty Images

Edward Luce YESTERDAY

What should we make of the fact that America's TV channels all carried the live jubilee festivities of an elderly monarch but will part ways on this week's hearings into an assault on US democracy? The light-hearted take is that the British crown is above politics, including in America. The darker interpretation is that the survival of US democracy itself is now a partisan issue.

The January 6 committee, which will be televised from Thursday, is hoping to emulate the Watergate hearings that led to Richard Nixon's downfall in 1974. So far, though, it is the differences that are glaring. Every US network carried the Watergate hearings live. They went on for months and were watched by almost three quarters of Americans. Fox News, which did not exist in Nixon's time, this week said it will not broadcast the January 6 hearings.

From Watergate, which took place 50 years ago next week, to January 6 is a measure of a transformed society. Though Nixon had just been re-elected by a landslide — the largest Republican presidential victory in history, with 61 per cent of the vote — the US Senate voted unanimously to open an investigation into [the Watergate burglary](#). Not one Republican dissented. The allegation that the US president might be a crook was too serious to be treated as normal politics.

Donald Trump, by contrast, had recently been defeated for re-election when all but

two Republicans voted against a House of Representatives inquiry into the January 6 2021 storming of Capitol Hill. The two profiles in courage, Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger, are now likely to be finished as Republicans. Their party successfully filibustered an attempt to set up a Senate committee. That is one yardstick of how much has changed.

Here is another. Watergate was a burglary of Democratic party offices. Nobody died. The violent assault on Capitol Hill ultimately claimed seven lives. To be sure, Nixon abused his powers to spy on opponents, steal their election plans and ruin anyone who got in the way. But he did not plot to overturn an election. Some of Nixon's fury probably stemmed from the claim that in 1960 his winning Democratic opponent, John F Kennedy, almost certainly benefited from stuffed ballot boxes in Chicago's notorious Cook County. That same year, Nixon honourably conceded. He was never going to fall for that again.

Whatever Nixon's psychology, exposing what he had done shocked the nation and changed tens of millions of minds, including loyalists. But it was the criminal methods he used to cover it up, rather than the underlying crime, which flipped the public mood. Trump, by contrast, is an open book. He publicly incited an attempt to reverse an election and owns "Stop the Steal" as a rallying logo. Moreover, this is not the America of 1973. Most minds are already made up. More than 40 per cent of Americans agree with Trump.

Can the January 6 hearings change that? It seems very unlikely. Trump was the first US president to be impeached twice yet neither of his Senate trials moved the needle. There is no reason to think the next set of hearings will be much different. Even were Mike Pence, his former vice-president and the unlikely hero of January 6, to spill the beans in prime time, Trump has successfully branded him as a traitor to the Maga crowds. In 1973, Howard Baker, the senior Republican on the committee, asked: "What did the president know and when did he know it?" In 2022, Republicans say the inquiry is a witch hunt, show no interest in finding out what Trump knew or when and echo his claim that Biden is an illegitimate president.

The ironic outcome is nostalgia for the Watergate era. Watergate proved that the American republic could withstand assault by a popular and very effective sitting president. The system worked. January 6 shows that an unpopular former president can wield a veto over the fate of democracy. The irony stems from the fact that declining trust in government began during Watergate and is now at rock bottom. Apart from a couple of interludes during Ronald Reagan's presidency in the 1980s and Bill Clinton's in the 1990s, trust in government to do the right thing some or all of

the time has been on the slide since Watergate. It is now at a [record low of 20 per cent](#).

Part of the cure for today's partisan mutual loathing would be a display of the admirable objectivity shown by the Watergate committee. But the America that was stunned into forcing Nixon's resignation seems almost as lost in time as the royal tyranny that it expelled. The past is another country, as the saying goes. America's present feels like two different nations that are barely on speaking terms.

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