

James Hamilton Contrasts Watergate and January 6

For more than half a century, James Hamilton has been an active participant and an inside observer of some of the most consequential moments in modern US history. He has been involved in investigations concerning Watergate, the Kennedy assassination, “Debategate,” the Keating Five, the Clinton impeachment, Vince Foster’s suicide, the Valerie Plame affair, Benghazi, and the Major League Baseball steroids scandal. He argued against Brett Kavanaugh in front of the Supreme Court and won. James has written about his career in his book *Advocate: On History’s Front Lines from Watergate to the Keating Five, Clinton Impeachment, and Benghazi*.

Below he uses his experience to compare the Watergate Committee and the January 6 Committee...

The Senate Watergate Committee. The House January 6 Committee. Both focused on a corrupt president. Both were highly successful in informing the nation of wrongdoing. But how different they were in approach and historical context.

Consider these facts about the Watergate Committee.

1. The committee essentially proceeded in a bipartisan fashion. It was established by a 77–0 Senate vote. The questions revealing the existence of the Nixon White House tapes were asked by Republican staffers. The committee’s votes to subpoena Nixon for the tapes, and then to sue him when he rebuffed the subpoena, were unanimous. The vote to adopt the committee’s massive report damning the Nixon Administration was unanimous. Such bipartisanship would not be possible in today’s divisive world.
2. When the Watergate Committee began, its ultimate conclusions were unknown. It was not until Watergate burglar James McCord claimed there was perjury in the trial of the burglars and that higher-ups were involved until John Dean testified that Nixon was involved in the cover-up, and until Alexander Butterfield revealed the existence of the White House tapes that the committee’s primary focus shifted to President Nixon. Eighty million people watched in suspense to see where the hearings would lead.
3. The committee presented facts in an old-fashioned way—by putting on witnesses and subjecting them to cross-examination. Videos of executive session testimony were not used. The testimony of witnesses, some of whom were hostile, was at times unpredictable. While a coherent story was presented, the hearings were not minutely scripted.

Now consider these facts about The House January 6 Committee.

1. This committee has been a partisan affair from the beginning. It was created by an essentially party-line vote. Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy had the right to appoint five members to the committee, but he withdrew his nominations after Speaker Nancy

Pelosi rejected two of them, including firebrand Jim Jordan. Pelosi herself appointed two Republicans—Vice Chair Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger—to the committee, but they are known for their opposition to Trump and are pariahs in the Republican Party.

2. There is no mystery or suspense as to the outcome of the committee’s investigation. During the first hearing, the committee announced that President Trump had an unlawful “sophisticated seven-part plan” to stay in office. The committee’s hearing is filling in the details of that seven-part plan. Some of the information presented has been indeed shocking, but the committee’s final conclusion as to Trump’s conduct has never been in doubt. Perhaps in part due to the lack of suspense, only around twenty million people so far have watched the hearing.
3. The committee’s hearings have been well-orchestrated presentations. Witnesses have testified, but their testimonies are part of carefully scripted sessions where committee members lay out the basic facts, and excerpts of video depositions and messages are used to bolster the case being made. There has not been any hostile cross-examination.

There are, of course, a lot of ways to skin a cat—or expose a corrupt president. The Senate Watergate Committee did it one way. The House January 6 Committee chose another. Given the time restraints, it faced, with the predicted change of control of the House in November, the choice of the latter is understandable. (The Watergate Committee, with more time, had over 280 hours of public hearings.) While recognizing the different approaches and the disparate partisan context, the work of both committees should be applauded. We will see if the January 6 Committee ultimately changes the course of history as the Senate Watergate Committee did.

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