

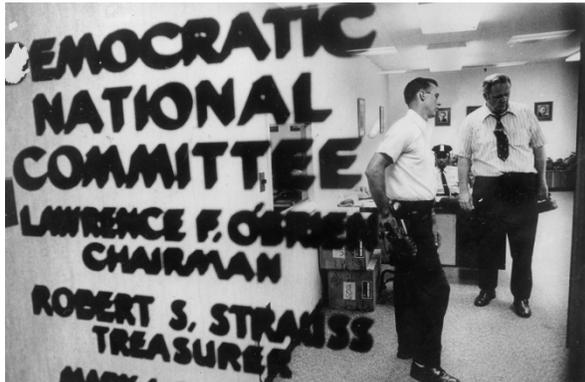
FAA and Watergate

Ronald Lamb, Jr., an intern in the FAA History Office, takes a look at a FAA administrator's role in the downfall of President Richard Nixon.

"Mr. Butterfield, are you aware of the installation of any listening devices in the Oval Office of the President?"

"I was aware of listening devices, yes sir..."

The 1960s and 1970s was a time of turmoil in American society. The youth of the day opposed the political and cultural views of their elder generation. Racial tension emerged as minorities began to confront injustice in society. During this time of social unrest, the Watergate scandal brought about a loss of faith in government. On June 17, 1972, police arrested five burglars inside the Democratic National Committee (DNC) headquarters at the Watergate complex in Washington, DC. One of the burglars, James McCord worked as the security chief for the



Committee to Re-elect the President (CRP), a fund-raising organization for President Richard Nixon. Nixon denied having a part in the break-in. The FBI, however, subsequently established that the Watergate break-in stemmed from a spying and sabotage effort conducted on behalf of CRP (pejoratively known as CREEP). Despite the growing scandal, Nixon won re-election to a second term.

In January 1973, five men were convicted for the Watergate break-in, and former Nixon aides, G. Gordon Liddy and James McCord were convicted of conspiracy, burglary, and wiretapping. Convinced that the scandal went deeper than just the break-in, *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein kept the break-in front page news. The Senate began its own investigation, and established the Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities. In May the Senate committee began hearings. As the hearings proceeded, evidence pointed to Nixon's direct involvement in the scandal. FAA Administrator Alexander Butterfield's public disclosure of the existence of a secret White House taping system during the hearings, which proved President Nixon's involvement in the scandal, ultimately led to Nixon's resignation on August 9, 1974.

Butterfield was born in Pensacola, Florida, on April 6, 1926, but spent much of his youth in California. He studied at the University of California for two years then left to join the United

States Air Force. During World War II he flew the Lockheed P-38 Lightning in the Pacific War. Butterfield also served in the Korean and Vietnam wars. He later served as a senior Defense Department representative in Australia, and then as an Air Force project officer for the General Dynamics F-III. When Richard Nixon took office, H.R. Haldeman, Nixon's first chief of staff and a friend of Butterfield's from the University of California, recommended Butterfield for a position as a deputy assistant to President Nixon. In 1969, after a 20-year distinguished military career, during which he earned the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Legion of Merit, Colonel Butterfield resigned from the Air Force and accepted the deputy assistant position. In his new position, Butterfield's responsibilities involved setting Nixon's schedule and maintaining historical records. He also supervised internal security for the White House. In this capacity, he oversaw the installation of a secret, voice-activated taping system in the White House.

During his second term, Nixon nominated Butterfield as FAA's fifth administrator. However, there was a holdup in the Senate confirmation process because of a statute in the US code which prohibited the FAA administrator from having a military affiliation. When congressional exemption from the statute appeared unlikely, Butterfield resigned his Air Force commission. (Former FAA administrators Pete Quesada and William "Bozo" McKee had also resigned their commissions, but Congress reinstated their military retirement after their tenure as FAA administrator.) On March 14, 1973, the Senate confirmed Alexander Butterfield as administrator.



Alexander Butterfield testifying before the Senate committee

Four months after Butterfield began his work as the FAA Administrator, the Senate Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities called him to testify about a suspected White House taping system. In earlier testimony, former Nixon aid, John Dean had revealed that the President recorded conversations. A man of integrity, but loyal to his boss, Butterfield decided only to disclose the taping system if asked directly if such a system existed.

In public testimony on July 16, 1973, when asked specifically if White House conversations were recorded, Butterfield replied, "Everything was taped. . . as long as the president was in attendance. There was not so much of a hint that something should not be taped." After Butterfield's testimony, a protracted legal battle ensued between the White House and the prosecutors trying to gain access to the tapes. In October, Nixon released some of the tapes. A gap of 18 1/2 minutes was found on a tape of Nixon and Haldeman prior to the Watergate break-in.

The House of Representatives began impeachment hearings in May 1974. On August 5, Nixon released the transcripts of three conversations he had with Haldeman that proved he had ordered a cover-up of the Watergate burglary. Facing impeachment by the House and removal from office by the Senate, on August 9, 1974 Nixon resigned the presidency.

Although Butterfield was not involved in the Watergate cover-up and did face any criminal consequences, his political career became irreparably tarnished among many Republicans. While some falsely accused him of being the CIA's spy to the White House, other friends and colleagues merely avoided him, considering him a traitor to the party and the President. Although he continued as FAA Administrator for the next eight months, Butterfield felt ostracized by the Ford administration. Attending subcabinet meetings, Butterfield noticed that friends seemed uncomfortable in his presence, as if afraid to appear on too good of terms with him. He also found it hard to promote the work of FAA. The press seemed to only want to talk to him about Watergate, not about the agency's accomplishments. And, difficulty with Secretary of Transportation Claude Brinegar over control of aviation safety matters made it increasingly difficult for Butterfield to get much FAA business done.

On March 25, 1975, Alexander Butterfield announced his resignation as FAA Administrator, effective March 31, after publicized differences with recently departed Secretary of Transportation Claude S. Brinegar and amid sharp criticism of FAA's recent safety record. President Ford had asked for his resignation in a move some interpreted as retribution for Butterfield's role in helping uncover the Watergate scandal. Unlike his some of his predecessors, Butterfield failed in his attempts to have his military commission reinstated.



May 24, 1974, Reproduction of original drawing by Herblock (Herbert Lawrence Block) published in the *Washington Post*

In an interview after he left FAA, Butterfield said, “Frankly, I don’t like being known as the man who revealed the existence of the tapes . . . It makes it appear that I ran full tilt to the Watergate committee and told them eagerly and breathlessly the very information that Nixon considered top secret. That was not the case. I was facing a true dilemma: I wanted very much to respect Nixon’s wishes and at the same time to be cooperative and forthright with the congressional investigators.”

After leaving FAA, Butterfield became a business executive working as president and COO of International Air Service Company, chairman of GMA Corporation and Global Network, Inc., and chairman and executive officer of Armistead and Alexander. He retired in 1995, and later served as a consultant in the making of three movies: *Nixon*; *Memphis Rising: Elvis Returns*; and *Watergate*.