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Allison M. Prasch

Department of Communication Studies, University of Minnesota

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Retelling Watergate: Apologia, Political Eulogy, and Richard Nixon’s “Final Campaign”

Allison M. Prasch

In this article, I analyze the text of the Nixon Library’s original Watergate exhibit as Richard Nixon’s final attempt to speak in his own defense and to eulogize his political life. To do this, the gallery narrative divided the events of Watergate into a series of small, seemingly unrelated events that the liberal media and congressional Democrats used to undermine the president. At the same time, the text portrayed Nixon as an active leader defending the executive branch from congressional and judicial overreach. This analysis shows how Nixon relied on rhetorical strategies of differentiation and transcendence to resuscitate his status as an elder statesman. It also suggests that critics should consider the apologetic potential of other memorial sites, particularly presidential libraries.

Richard Nixon was a master of self-defense. Indeed, some of his most rhetorically successful addresses were those that defended some aspect of his character or political position. In his “Checkers Speech” of September 23, 1952, the senator and vice presidential candidate defended his “honesty and integrity” in response to charges that he accepted $18,000 from his political supporters. Seventeen years later, in his November 3, 1969, “Vietnamization” address, the president spoke on behalf of “the great silent majority of my fellow Americans” who supported his policy on Vietnam, defending them against the “vocal minority” of those who tried to “impose [their view] on the Nation by mounting demonstrations in the street.” And then, of course, there was Watergate. As Jackson Harrell, B. L. Ware, and Wil A. Linkugel note, Nixon faced “the task of constructing a sustained defense of his character—a campaign of...
apologic rhetoric substantively beginning on March 12, 1973, and ending only with his resignation from the Presidency.” But this rhetoric of self-defense continued after Nixon’s departure from the Oval Office and took on many forms, including a series of interviews with British journalist David Frost in 1977 and the nine books Nixon published post-Watergate. A recurring theme throughout these public statements was Nixon’s attempt to resuscitate his political life as an elder statesman. In his conclusion to Leaders, Nixon observed:

All leaders live with opposition. All hope to be vindicated by history. The reputations of some grow after they leave office. The reputations of others shrink... The final verdict of history is not rendered quickly. It takes not just years but decades or generations to be handed down.... All the leaders in this book had their successes and failures, their strengths and weaknesses, their virtues and vices. We can only guess how historians will evaluate their respective legacies a century from now. That will depend in part on who wins the world struggle and who writes the histories. But these leaders did not shrink from the battle. They entered the arena.

In this statement, Nixon positioned himself as one of those great leaders who ultimately would be “vindicated by history.” He did not leave this history to chance, however, and was determined to write it himself. It should come as no surprise, then, that Nixon’s rhetoric of self-defense extended beyond his public statements to his private library in Yorba Linda, California.

Nixon’s decision to build the Richard Nixon Library and Birthplace was a self-defensive posture in itself. Because the federal government seized all papers, tape recordings, and other materials in December 1974, Nixon had nothing from his presidential years to feature in his library’s archive. Without the materials necessary to open an official presidential archive, the former president constructed a site that appeared to be every bit as presidential as the libraries his predecessors had built—and yet, it had no ties to the National Archives or the federal government. The Richard Nixon Library and Birthplace (henceforth the Nixon Library) opened to the public on July 20, 1990. Located at the intersection of Yorba Linda Boulevard and Imperial Highway 90 among supermarkets and strip malls, the nine-acre site featured the restored farmhouse in which Nixon was born and a 5,500 square foot library and museum space featuring a variety of exhibits covering Richard Nixon’s life and political career. These galleries covered his first bid for U.S. Congress in 1946, his 1960 presidential campaign against John F. Kennedy, the 1972 opening to China, and a behind-the-scenes look at the speechwriting process behind Nixon’s 1969 “Silent Majority” speech, to name a few. In one of the last exhibits entitled “Watergate: The Final Campaign,” Nixon presented his final apologia to the U.S. public.

In this article, I analyze the Nixon Library’s Watergate exhibit as an apologic space that allowed Nixon to speak in his own defense and to eulogize his political life. Analyzing the rhetorical strategies of self-defense in this museum gallery reveals how Nixon used the space not only to retell the events of Watergate but also to memorialize his political life in an attempt to resuscitate his status as an elder statesman.
In what follows, I first consider the public and private dimensions of presidential libraries and how these spaces provide former chief executives the opportunity for self-commemoration. I then provide a brief overview of relevant literature on apologia and political eulogy to explain how I use these concepts in my analysis. After this historical and theoretical discussion, I examine how Nixon and post-presidential aide Bob Bostock designed the Watergate gallery so that visitors would “walk away from it, shaking their heads, wondering how the nation ever let such a great President be taken away from them.”

Presidential Libraries, Apologia, and Political Eulogy

To understand how Nixon used the Watergate gallery as a space for apologia and self-eulogy, one must first consider the unique features of presidential libraries and how the Nixon Library departed from these norms. The advent of the presidential library, writes Benjamin Hufbauer, “marks the dramatic increase in presidential authority that has occurred during an era when the United States has become the most powerful nation in the world. . . . The presidential monuments of the past—the obelisks and classical temples built by and for posterity—have largely been replaced by presidential libraries.” Part of what makes these “presidential temples” so intriguing is that they are simultaneously public and private. The archive, run by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), houses all materials related to the president’s “constitutional, statutory, or other official or ceremonial duties” during his time in office. However, much of what the general public encounters at presidential libraries—the museum exhibits, galleries, and interactive displays—is designed and funded by private foundations and individuals. These groups most often are ardent supporters of the former president, dedicated to advancing the most attractive aspects of his legacy. These museum spaces thus enable former presidents to (re)construct the past creatively and selectively for millions of visitors.

Hufbauer argues that this self-commemorative aspect creates “temples that promote the best possible place for their subjects within civil religion.” Mary E. Stuckey observes that presidential “libraries and especially their museums are reflections of how the president in question—or his heirs—wishes that president to be remembered. . . . These museums do not provide a neutral view of history, nor of the history of a given presidential administration, and it is important to remember that. But the libraries do provide an important resource for scholars of both the presidency and presidential history.” Stuckey’s point underscores the public/private dimensions of presidential libraries and pushes the critic to examine how these spaces create and sustain a rhetorical argument about the former chief executive’s life and legacy. Because presidential libraries are public spaces and places of presidential self-commemoration, we can expect them to defend certain aspects of the chief executive’s time in office. But the Nixon Library’s original Watergate exhibit is notable because it radically revised the story of Watergate and portrayed Nixon as an honorable leader who ultimately sacrificed his political life for the good of the nation.
In the analysis that follows, I utilize the generic framework of apologia to show how Nixon and Bostock specifically designed the Watergate gallery as a self-defensive space. The apologia can be understood as a speaker’s response to charges leveled against them, particularly those accusations that question one’s “moral nature, motives, or reputation.” In their foundational essay on the apologetic genre, B. L. Ware and Wil A. Linkugel outline the various factors and postures of verbal self-defense, categories that help critics identify the strategies rhetors utilize when responding to accusation or blame. For the purposes of my analysis, I focus on two specific strategies Nixon and Bostock employed in the Watergate gallery: differentiation and transcendence. Differentiation describes any rhetorical strategy that attempts to separate “some fact, sentiment, object, or relationship from some larger context within which the audience presently views that attribute.” Transcendence, on the other hand, is the opposite of differentiation and refers to any rhetorical strategy that “cognitively joins some fact, sentiment, object, or relationship with some larger context within which the audience does not presently view that attribute.” In other words, differentiation divides larger concepts or categories into smaller ideas, facts, or sentiments, resulting “in a splitting apart, a particularization, of cognitive elements in the minds of the listeners.” Conversely, transcendence links these smaller ideas, facts, or sentiments to a broader conceptual framework and creates “a newly realized identification on the part of the audience.” In this way, then, both differentiation and transcendence “are psychologically transformative” for the audience. As I will demonstrate, the Watergate gallery narrative employed a dual strategy of differentiation and transcendence to minimize the political implications of Watergate and to maximize Nixon’s presidential image. In this retelling, Watergate was petty, small, and engineered by the president’s political enemies. Nixon, on the other hand, transcended these minor events as an active and engaged leader attempting to protect the executive branch from congressional and judicial overreach.

Throughout his post-presidential writings, interviews, and eventually the Watergate exhibit, Nixon described Watergate as “the campaign of [his] life,” a bloody battle with clear winners and losers, friends and foes. In a diary entry from January 5, 1974, Nixon used military imagery to describe his “fight” against the charges leveled against him: “Above all else: Dignity, command, faith, head high, no fear, build a new spirit, drive, act like a President, act like a winner. Opponents are savage destroyers, haters. Time to use full power of the President to fight overwhelming forces arrayed against us.” In this view, Watergate was a political—even military—campaign that forced Nixon to defend himself against “savage destroyers” and “overwhelming forces” that sought to undermine his presidential authority. When Nixon resigned on August 9, 1974, it signaled much more than the end of his “campaign.” It was political death at the hands of his enemies who had concocted a “smoking gun.” Thus, the Watergate gallery functioned not only as the president’s final apologia to the U.S. public, but also as a political eulogy for a fallen hero. Equating political defeat and death is not uncommon for politicians. William Shaffir and Steven Kleinknecht observe that when individuals lose elections and are “overwhelmed by the enormity of the loss—their egos having been publicly assaulted and bruised—not an inconsiderable
number analogize the feelings experienced to death." What is particularly interesting about Nixon’s account, however, is that he attempted to write his own political eulogy into the Watergate exhibit and to use this eulogy as a self-defensive tactic.

Traditionally understood, eulogies honor the memory of the deceased and help the surviving audience cope with feelings of grief and loss. Donovan J. Ochs explains that the funeral panegyric should cause the audience “to hear a deficit, an unfair shortage of sorts, in the account of an unrewarded virtuous action. If a person is shown to have acted selflessly for the greater good of a collective,” the surviving audiences should “mentally raise their previous estimation of the deceased.” The true civic hero—one who acted bravely and selflessly in the face of overwhelming opposition and even certain death—would receive posthumous praise from his or her community. This is exactly how Nixon positioned himself after his resignation, frequently employing metaphors of life/death and victory/defeat to describe the events of Watergate. Historian Michael Schudson astutely notes that

Richard Nixon was deeply concerned with his reputation or his public image when he was in office. But Nixon’s career shows an unusual disjunction of a long record of active achievement in political office followed by another long record of active refashioning of his reputation during a kind of living, posthumous career. Metaphorically, Nixon died when he resigned the presidency and he has been his own survivor, entrusted to preserve and promote the reputation of the Nixon who died.

Schudson’s observation is particularly helpful for this project because it suggests that Nixon’s rhetoric of self-defense was linked inextricably with his attempt to eulogize his political life. Nixon’s ultimate goal was to convince the U.S. public that his political death should be seen as a tragedy, not a triumph. As my analysis of the museum gallery will show, the Watergate exhibit ultimately functioned as a eulogistic apologia, framing Nixon’s actions as those of a chief executive who sacrificed his (political) life for the ultimate good of the nation.

Nixon’s “Final Campaign”: Apologia and Political Eulogy at the Watergate Gallery

From the very beginning, Nixon and post-presidential aide Bob Bostock designed the Watergate Gallery as a space where the president could issue his final apologia to the U.S. public. In a remarkable 30-page “Memorandum for the President” dated June 1, 1990, Bostock outlined the text for the library’s display on Watergate. Nixon read and approved this document with minor changes. Nixon’s handwritten note, “Bob—a brilliant presentation” (with brilliant underlined twice), graces the first page of the memo. The Watergate Room was a long, narrow, 65-foot corridor that featured a detailed timeline of the events of June 17, 1972 (the date of the Watergate break-in) to August 9, 1974 (the date Nixon resigned). This wall was divided into three sections. The top portion displayed “headlines” written by Bostock to “give a broad overview of events.” The middle portion contained quotes from various politicians, government officials, and public figures speaking about these events. The bottom portion featured
a narrative explaining the timeline and quotations. In his memorandum, Bostock explained that the “three sections are meant to correspond to each other. As the visitor walks down the length of the display, he will see the ‘headlines’ above him, quotes at eye level, and the explanation at a comfortable reading level.”

After describing the exhibit’s physical design, Bostock commented on his “approach to this exhibit” and ultimate goal for the gallery narrative. These opening remarks are worth quoting at length, for they reveal the two apologetic strategies Nixon and Bostock employed throughout the Watergate exhibit: differentiation and transcendence.

The Watergate story is so incredibly complex and convoluted. I deliberately avoided trying to weave into the exhibit coverage of what anyone else was or was not doing, except when their actions or inaction directly impacted on [sic] RN . . . .

I have also tried to present Watergate in context with the greater events which were taking up the bulk of RN’s time during that period. Nearly half of the “headlines” refer to non-Watergate events, such as the Summits, Middle East, etc. I think it is vital to show that the President was very much involved in running the country during this entire period . . . .

The explanatory text looks at the major issues and tries to render them understandable. I am firmly convinced that when people see Watergate broken down into its component parts they will wonder what all the fuss was about. They will also find that the sum of the parts did not equal the outcome.

In this passage, Bostock described the narrative within the Watergate exhibit as one that would separate the “incredibly complex and convoluted” Watergate story “into its component parts” and present Nixon as an active chief executive who transcended these “component parts” as a responsible, well-respected world leader. Ware and Linkugel describe differentiation as any strategy that divides “the old context [of an event] into two or more new constructions of reality” and leads to “a change in the audience’s new meanings.” In this instance, the “old context” or commonly held view of Watergate as a series of intentional cover-ups and abuses of power by the president was separated into the “component parts” Bostock and Nixon deemed essential to their retelling of Watergate.

At the same time, the Watergate gallery positioned Nixon as a very busy man who was concerned primarily with “running the country” instead of being distracted by petty political fights in Washington. In this frame, Nixon transcended the “component parts” of Watergate and emerged as a president who was attending to more important matters. Strategies of transcendence, write Ware and Linkugel, “psychologically move the audience away from the particulars of the charge at hand in a direction toward some more abstract, general view of his character.” Although the text would admit that Nixon had made “inexcusable misjudgments” during this period, this did not mean the president was guilty. Instead, these misjudgments were interpreted as innocent mistakes made by a chief executive trying to govern the nation, win a presidential election, and defend the executive branch from congressional and judicial overreach.
In his final explanatory comments to Nixon, Bostock was explicit about the exhibit’s self-defensive posture:

As you mentioned the other day, the critics will blast us on this one no matter what we say. Your advice has been my approach—tell the story the way it should be told, without any quarter given to those who will find fault with it. I don’t believe there is anything to apologize for—Watergate was a struggle for power between the duly elected leader of the nation and those who would frustrate the will of the people. Let’s call it what it was, critics notwithstanding. I hope that is what I am on the way to accomplishing with this text.39

Here Bostock identified Nixon’s advice for the Watergate gallery: “tell the story the way it should be told” and ignore “those who will find fault with it.” More importantly, Bostock argued that there was nothing for which Nixon should apologize. Instead, this gallery was to be the antithesis of an apology: a space where Nixon could lay out his final defense that would endure even after he died. But the Watergate gallery also provided an opportunity for Nixon to mourn his political death. This secondary purpose is revealed in Bostock’s final sentence: “My ultimate goal in this exhibit is this: That people will walk away from it, shaking their heads, wondering how the nation ever let such a great President be taken away from them.”40 Bostock’s use of “taken” implied that Nixon had been acted upon by some outside force and was ultimately defeated. This word choice also paralleled stories of individuals who experience an untimely end through no fault of their own—cancer, a car accident, or a sudden heart attack—and are taken from their loved ones prematurely. In these situations, family members and friends blame some outside force—a malignant tumor, a drunk driver, or a clogged artery—for death. In this instance, Nixon and Bostock crafted a narrative that blamed forces outside of Nixon’s control—the liberal media, Democrats in Congress, and an emotionally driven public—for the president’s untimely end.41

Watergate: Nixon’s Fight for His Political Life

The Watergate gallery opened with a quotation from Richard Nixon’s memoir, RN: “I had thought that 1972 was going to be my last political campaign. But by the beginning of 1974 I recognized that I was about to embark on the campaign of my life.”42 The first three sentences of the explanatory text set the tone for rest of the Watergate exhibit. “Watergate is a word that has come to mean many things to many people. What it was before June 17, 1972[,] was a luxury apartment, office, and hotel complex in Washington, D.C. What it became over the course of the next twenty-six months was a catch-word for every misjudgment, miscalculation, or crime, imagined or real, that had ever been contemplated by anyone even remotely connected with the Nixon Administration.”43 This introductory narrative had several rhetorical purposes.

First, by describing what Watergate had been prior to June 17, 1972, the text reminded the visitor of what the noun “Watergate” actually described: a condominium complex for Washington, D.C.’s elite. This description relied on a strategy
of differentiation by dissociating what “Watergate” really meant—a ritzy apartment and office building overlooking the Potomac—from the historical events the U.S. public now associated with it. How had this brick-and-mortar building somehow mushroomed into a “catch-word” for “every misjudgment, miscalculation, or crime” ever contemplated by anyone “remotely connected with the Nixon Administration”? Describing Watergate as a “catch-word” suggested that it had become a label to stick on any political “misjudgment” or “miscalculation,” two nouns that suggest an innocent mistake. This narrative attempted to separate “Watergate” into “component parts” that could be easily explained and justified.

But even as the narrative tried to simplify the historical events that would follow, the text situated “Watergate” within a larger historical and political framework, particularly in relation to what “Watergate” did to the president. In this strategy of transcendence, the immediate particulars of “Watergate” were linked to a much larger narrative: the loss of Nixon’s political life. “Even today, basic questions remain unknown and perhaps unknowable,” the text explained. “But one thing is certain. ‘Watergate’ cost Nixon his Presidency.” Ware and Linkugel write that “transcendence is transformative in the sense that any such strategy affects the meaning which the audience attaches to the manipulated attribute. In sum, those strategies which involve a change in cognitive identification and in meaning factor together as transcendence.”

Here, the text attempted to transform the meaning of “Watergate” from an “enormously complex” story into the agent responsible for Nixon’s political death. This strategy of transcendence continued as the text shifted to situate the visitor within Nixon’s own perspective:

Nixon saw Watergate as his final campaign. He was fighting for his political life against those who sought to reverse the stunning mandate he had received from the voters on November 7, 1972.

At the time, commentators sought to portray Watergate strictly as a morality play, as a struggle between right and wrong, truth and falsehood, good and evil. Given the benefit of time, it is now clear that Watergate was an epic and bloody political battle fought for the highest stakes, with no holds barred. President Nixon’s reputation and ability to govern was the battlefield. Control of the direction the nation would take as it entered its third century was the prize.

Nixon himself said he made inexcusable misjudgments during Watergate. But what is equally clear is that his political opponents exploited those misjudgments as a way to further their own, purely political goals.

In the marginalia, Nixon inserted the qualifier “ruthlessly” to describe how his political opponents exploited his “misjudgments.” In these eight sentences, the exhibit text reframed Watergate as “an epic and bloody political battle” waged by Nixon’s political adversaries. It also preempted allegations of Nixon’s own wrongdoing in the Watergate affair, stating that the president had admitted to “inexcusable misjudgments.” By foregrounding the exhibit with this acknowledgement, the narrative implicitly suggested that Nixon was just trying to do his job as president: make good on his promises to the U.S. voters and shepherd the nation into its third century. But even though Nixon admitted to “inexcusable misjudgments,” his enemies
were bent on "exploit[ing]" them for their own political purposes. This narrative bolstered Nixon's presidential persona and positioned Watergate as a small incident blown out of proportion by those who wished to undermine the president's reputation and political leadership.

The Watergate Burglary

The first event featured on the timeline was the June 17, 1972, burglary of the Democratic National Committee offices in the Watergate complex. The president "first learned of the attempted break-in the following morning in an article in the Miami Herald," the exhibit stated. Explaining that Nixon heard about the burglary after it had taken place, the text implied that there was no way Nixon could have orchestrated the break-in if he learned about it like everyone else: in a newspaper article. However, the "obvious question" that demanded an answer was: "Who ordered the Watergate break-in?" Here the question was presented as a fair and legitimate one, but one that was still unanswered. "Even today," the text explained, "no one has yet offered a plausible reason why the break-in was ordered in the first place." Although "[m]illions of dollars, thousands of leads, hundreds of interviews, and countless hours were spent by the Executive Branch, Congress, and the Watergate Special Prosecutor" in search of an answer, "[n]ot one shred of evidence was ever unearthed which even remotely suggested that the President ordered the bugging or knew about it in advance." According to the exhibit text, investigators never uncovered any proof linking Nixon to the break-in. And yet, Nixon later admitted in his memoirs that he told his staff to come up with "imaginative dirty tricks" to use against their Democratic opponents after the 1970 midterm election. No doubt the Watergate burglary was one of these "dirty tricks."

There was one finding, however, that was "irrefutable — President Nixon was in no way connected with this attempted 'third rate burglary.'" Focusing on what was clear and definite, the text immediately distanced Nixon from the Watergate break-in. This was a classic strategy of self-defense: denial. Ware and Linkugel write that denial occurs when one "den[ies] alleged facts, sentiments, objects, or relationships." By rejecting any connection between Nixon and the June 17, 1972, break-in, the gallery text also denied that the president had any sinister motives or conducted any illegal activity in the coming months. If "Watergate" referred to a bungled burglary attempt on the Democratic National Headquarters and Nixon was "in no way connected" with this burglary, then how could he be implicated in the events that followed?

The narrative then described how Democratic presidential candidate George McGovern attempted to make Watergate an issue in "his problem-plagued campaign for the White House" [Nixon replaced "problem-plagued" with "hopeless"]). However, the text explained, Nixon "went on to win a landslide of historic proportions," and the Watergate case "seemed to come to a close shortly before the President was sworn in for his second term, when four of the five charged in the break-in pleaded guilty before Judge John Sirica. In fact, the crisis was taking on new life."
sentence, the narrative used verbs that often refer to life or death. The crisis was “com[ing] to a close” before Nixon began his second term, but, in actuality, it was “taking on new life,” or a life of its own. This language suggested that the Watergate burglary had been dealt with and the offenders had “pleaded guilty.” And yet, somehow, the “crisis” continued, resurrected by Nixon’s political enemies.

What the President Knew Versus What the President Did

During the Watergate congressional hearings, Senator Howard Baker, the vice chairman of the Senate Watergate Committee, famously summarized the committee’s central question: “What did the president know, and when did he know it?” Senator Baker’s question focused attention on what Nixon knew and, depending on when he knew it, whether this knowledge led to illegal activity. Throughout the Watergate gallery, however, the text focused on what Nixon did after learning about the June 17, 1972, burglary. In the next major section of the museum gallery, the heading asked, “What Did the President Do, and When Did He Do It?” This slight change from what Nixon knew to what he did redirected the audience in a significant way. By asking what the president did, the exhibit text suggested that Nixon actively supported and participated in the Watergate investigation. However, by ignoring what Nixon knew, the narrative subtly dismissed any premeditation that would render specific actions as sinister and manipulative. In this way, the text simultaneously denied that Nixon had any intention of limiting a full investigation even as it bolstered his image of a president concerned for national security and a politician trying to win reelection.

After it was revealed that one of the Watergate burglars “was connected with the Committee to Re-elect the President,” the narrative stated that “the press began speculating about possible connections to the White House and the Democrats filed suit against CRP [Committee to Re-elect the President] for invasion of privacy and violation of civil rights.” These were the individuals responsible for resurrecting the “crisis” from the dead. In response, Nixon “immediately sought to find out whether the White House was involved in the break-in.” His chief of staff H. R. Haldeman assured him “no one at the White House had anything to do with its planning or execution.”

Still, someone at his re-election campaign had made a foolish mistake [Nixon inserted “an incredibly” in the margin to qualify what type of foolish mistake this was]. Nixon, a politician in a political year, acted in a political way. He was obviously concerned that the Democrats not be handed an issue. Over the course of the next few days, the President discussed ways in which to handle the political ramifications of the problem—certain, at all times, that the White House was not involved.53

However, according to transcripts of the White House tapes, these conversations actually included a variety of other schemes, including a plan to have G. Gordon Liddy, the general counsel for the president’s reelection committee, take the blame for authorizing the Watergate break-in.54 On June 21, Nixon authorized Haldeman
to have domestic affairs adviser John Ehrlichman tell the FBI to back off from their investigation of Watergate. According to the exhibit text, however, Nixon did not “agree” with this plan until two days later:

On June 23, Bob Haldeman, passing on a suggestion he said had been made to him by White House counsel John Dean, told Nixon that one approach was to have the CIA tell the FBI to limit its investigation. After all, since people associated with the CIA were among the burglars, legitimate CIA operations might well be compromised.

In this section, the gallery narrative denied that Nixon had any intent of obstructing justice or causing harm. Instead, it bolstered his image as a politician doing what anyone else would do “in a political year.” Moreover, the text used passive verbs to describe the actions of both Haldeman and Nixon. Haldeman was simply “passing on a suggestion” made by Dean, and Nixon “agreed” with this suggestion. What the text obscured was Nixon’s direct involvement in weighing how this proposal would ensure that the FBI did not discover links between the White House and other illegal activities.

Two weeks later, when FBI Director Pat Gray told Nixon that the CIA was “putting pressure on him to limit the investigation,” Nixon “strongly urged Gray to proceed with a full investigation” and told his aides that “the FBI was not to be obstructed in any way.” The White House tape transcripts indicate, however, that Nixon was particularly concerned that there be no appearance of a cover-up. The gallery text stressed the extensive nature of the FBI’s investigation, noting that “[b]efore it was done more than 300 agents in 51 field offices had developed nearly two thousand leads, conducted more than 1500 interviews, and expended over 14,000 man hours in their investigation.” Emphasizing the numerous agents, field offices, potential leads, interviews, and man-hours provided empirical evidence (although it is unclear where these numbers came from) for Nixon’s commitment to a full and fair investigation. This long numerical list dissociated Nixon from any “obstruction of justice” while simultaneously bolstering his credibility.

After briefly mentioning that Nixon charged White House counsel John Dean with the task of “managing the political damage of Watergate without covering it up,” the narrative jumped forward nine months to March 21, 1973, the date on which Dean told Nixon that there was “a cancer—within—close to the presidency, that’s growing. It’s growing daily.” After that quotation from Dean, the text explained that “Dean gave details to the President which he had not communicated to him before. ‘I can tell from our conversation that these are things you have no knowledge of,’ Dean told the President.” The exhibit text did not specify what these “details” or “things” were. In fact, any visitor who was unfamiliar with the details of Watergate would be unaware of what this “cancer” in fact was. Dean’s comment actually referred to the White House’s attempted cover-up of the Watergate burglary, a detail Nixon not only knew about but also authorized himself. But the gallery narrative only focused on what Nixon did in response to what he supposedly had just learned:

As the weeks progressed, the President came under increasing pressure to fire his closest advisors, Haldeman and John Ehrlichman. But the President was not
anxious to fire people based on the appearance of guilt [“not anxious” was later replaced with “reluctant” by Nixon]. He wanted proof. But rumors and unsubstantiated allegations reported by the media about Watergate and possible White House involvement were making it difficult for the President and the White House staff to fully concentrate on the serious problems confronting the nation.63

These “rumors and unsubstantiated allegations reported by the media” were more than rumors. On March 23, one of the Watergate burglars, James W. McCord, Jr. (a former CIA agent who was also on the staff of the Committee to Reelect the President), revealed that “[t]here was political pressure applied to the [Watergate] defendants to plead guilty and remain silent.”64 Then, in April, came credible information that Haldeman, Ehrlichman, and Dean were connected to the Watergate cover-up.65 The exhibit text, however, skipped these details and instead focused only on how these “rumors and unsubstantiated allegations” were interfering with the president’s ability to address “the serious problems confronting the nation.” Apparently, Watergate was not one of those problems:

On April 30, 1973, in his first televised address about Watergate, President Nixon announced the resignations of Haldeman and Ehrlichman, as well as the departure of John Dean. The president did not try to shift blame to others. He accepted it, as the “man at the top.”

Within weeks, Nixon’s Attorney General Elliot Richardson named a special prosecutor to investigate Watergate, and the Senate Watergate Committee began its hearings into the matter.66

This section attempted to bolster Nixon’s presidential image as a man who “did not try to shift blame to others” but “accepted it, as the ‘man at the top.’” In this frame, Nixon transcended the particulars of the situation (those things he had “no knowledge of,” according to the text) to assume responsibility as the nation’s leader. He did just what the U.S. public expected him to do: accept the blame for the indiscretions of his staff and move the nation forward. And yet, the text explained that the president’s speech “seemed to open a floodgate through which torrents of unsubstantiated allegations, false accusations, and mighty moralizing flowed down upon the President . . . . A pitched, highly partisan battle—Nixon called it his final campaign—was in full swing.”67

The White House Tapes and the Doctrine of Executive Privilege

The next major section of the Watergate exhibit introduced “[t]he ground on which Nixon’s final campaign would be fought”: control of the White House tapes. Here and throughout the rest of the gallery, the narrative engaged in strategies of differentiation and transcendence to position Nixon as a stalwart defender of the doctrine of executive privilege and implied that the president ultimately suffered an unjust political death because of his commitment to maintaining a separation of powers as laid out in the U.S. Constitution. First, the narrative reframed Nixon’s refusal to release the White House tapes as an action motivated by the president’s constitutional right to privacy and supported by historical precedent. Second, the
exhibit text transcended these particular details to argue that the real issue at stake was protecting the executive branch from judicial and congressional overreach.

This perspective began with the gallery’s discussion of the White House taping system, which it described as routine and justified. After White House aide Alexander Butterfield’s revelation of the taping system in his July 16, 1973, testimony, the narrative explained that

> Watergate took on an entirely new dimension. The focus changed. The ground on which Nixon’s final campaign would now be fought was control of the tapes. Did the President have the right to assert the ancient [“ancient” was crossed out by Nixon and replaced with “Time honored”] doctrine of executive privilege, or did Congressional and prosecutorial investigators have the right to demand release of [here Nixon inserted “confidential”] Presidential materials?68

In this short paragraph, the narrative presented the tapes (and Nixon’s attempt to keep them private) as the “ground” on which Nixon would win or lose, live or die. Although some of Nixon’s advisors “recommended he destroy all the tapes, reasoning that the tapes were the President’s personal property and were his to destroy,” Nixon decided to keep them intact but “to protect them from release by vigorously defending the doctrine of executive privilege.”69 The gallery defined this doctrine for the visitor, explaining that “[t]he doctrine of Executive privilege grants the President the right to maintain the confidentiality of his papers. Presidents beginning with Jefferson have asserted this right in denying requests from the Congress or the Courts from the President’s files. Never before in the history of the Presidency was a chief executive forced to reveal private papers.”70 The emphasis here was on the private nature of the papers. Because the papers (or, in this case, the tapes) were Nixon’s personal property, why should he be forced to give them up?

When Chief Justice of the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia John Sirica ruled that Nixon had to release tape transcripts to Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox, the president refused. The gallery narrative explained that, although “some” charged that Nixon was attempting to obstruct the Watergate investigation, the president’s “primary concern was to protect the confidentiality and privacy with which any Chief Executive must conduct his business. President Nixon’s assertions of Executive privilege over the tapes came from a deep sense of dedication to preserving the office of the Presidency from efforts to weaken it by the Congress and the Courts.”71 This narrative positioned Nixon as motivated primarily by a desire to defend the executive branch from overzealous legislators and judicial activists. This theme continued in the exhibit text’s discussion of the White House transcript release on April 29, 1974.

As the “battle for the tapes” continued, the text explained that the president’s “desire to protect the Presidency from unprecedented intrusions into its prerogatives was being portrayed as a desire to withhold information from investigators. Explaining the doctrine of Executive privilege would not be easy in the best of times. During the growing hysteria of Watergate, it was particularly difficult.”72
But because the mass public had been overtaken by “hysteria,” a term that described a purely emotional—not logical—reaction, the president “recognized that political realities dictated yet another compromise.” This use of “compromise” suggested that the national “hysteria” forced Nixon to cede his constitutional right to executive privilege. In actuality, however, Nixon was responding to subpoenas from the House Judiciary Committee for over 200 recorded conversations. When the White House released 1,300 pages of transcripts of these conversations, the exhibit explained that the conversations “hit people in the gut, not in the head.” This language suggested yet again that this was a citizenry who relied solely on their emotions and not their brains. The real problem with these transcripts, however, was that 1,878 bits were rendered “inaudible” or “unintelligible”—and Nixon was the speaker most difficult to understand. The House Judiciary Committee ultimately concluded that these transcripts had been doctored and did not fulfill the subpoena requirements. But the Watergate gallery narrative explained these omissions as a routine measure to protect presidential privacy. “These transcripts were edited versions of all the conversations which had been requested. To maintain Executive privilege in those areas not related to Watergate, some portions of the conversations were not included.” Again, the president’s actions were described as primarily motivated by his concern for upholding the separation of powers.

Because the released transcripts were incomplete, the House Judiciary Committee requested more tapes. Nixon flatly refused. The gallery narrative explained that this request was further evidence of “their relentless effort to overturn the doctrine of Executive privilege... But the President drew the line—no more tapes or transcripts would be released. He had decided he would do what every citizen had the right to do. He would take his case to the Supreme Court for a final determination.” This narrative framed Nixon’s decision as one made out of concern for the president’s constitutionally guaranteed right to secrecy. In this view, Nixon was not just under attack—the U.S. Constitution was! On July 24, 1974, the Supreme Court unanimously ruled that, although the president did have the right to executive privilege, the “generalized assertion of privilege must yield to the demonstrated, specific need for the evidence in a pending criminal trial and the fundamental demands of due process of law in the fair administration of criminal justice.” In other words, the White House now was required to turn over every single subpoenaed tape recording to the House Judiciary Committee. One of these subpoenaed tapes was the “smoking gun” Nixon’s opponents had been looking for: a recording of the June 23, 1972, conversation between Nixon and Haldeman in which the president directed his chief of staff to have the FBI limit its investigation of the Watergate burglary.

When the gallery finally addressed the “smoking gun” tape directly, it provided a detailed account of what Nixon said, why he said it, and the actions he took to ensure that the FBI completed a full and thorough investigation into the Watergate burglary. The gallery narrative repeated similar arguments from its earlier mention of the June 23rd meeting: Nixon and Haldeman had “a legitimate national security concern” to consider because the FBI’s investigation “could end up uncovering some covert actions undertaken by the CIA.” The narrative then acknowledged that Nixon
and Haldeman thought “it would be helpful politically if the FBI would limit its investigation.” And yet, the text suggested, focusing on Nixon’s political motivations in this conversation was one-sided and overly-simplistic:

In looking at the June 23rd tape, it is equally important to ask whether the FBI did, in fact, curtail its investigation in response to a request from the CIA. On July 6, 1973 [sic], acting FBI Director L. Patrick Gray told the President that he had been receiving pressure to suppress his investigation. [T]he President’s response was clear — he told Gray emphatically to press forward with his inquiry. Nixon then instructed his top White House aides to make sure the White House and the Committee to Re-elect the President cooperated fully with the FBI’s investigation. No obstruction of justice took place as a result of the June 23rd conversation.82

In this paragraph, the gallery narrative argued that even if Nixon had political motives behind limiting the FBI’s investigation of Watergate, this investigation was never hindered. In fact, it was Nixon who personally contacted Gray and members of the White House staff to ensure that a proper investigation was completed. This description focused on very minute details—dates, individuals, and explicit orders—to simplify the “smoking gun” tape into easily digestible bits. It portrayed the June 23rd conversation as one that any executive might have with a close aide imagining a best-case scenario to an inconvenient situation. But when it came down to formal directives, the exhibit narrative argued that the president did what was right, politics aside. This strategy of differentiation worked to redefine Nixon’s relationship to the Watergate investigation. He was not a “crook” attempting to cover his dirty tracks.83 Instead, he was a seasoned politician with natural political motivations.

Throughout this second half of the Watergate exhibit, the gallery narrative positioned Nixon as a staunch defender of the separation of powers and executive privilege. This interpretation encouraged the visitor to believe that the U.S. Congress and the Supreme Court had overstepped their legal authority by demanding presidential documents and records that were supposedly protected by the doctrine of executive privilege. In this view, the Congress and the Supreme Court were guilty, not Nixon. Moreover, by continually focusing on the actions of the congressional and judicial branches, the exhibit text minimized the information the subpoenas revealed—most notably, irrefutable evidence that Nixon attempted to limit the FBI’s investigation of the Watergate burglary.

Nixon’s Political Death

The final section of the exhibit, entitled “The Decision to Resign,” opened with a passage from Nixon’s August 8, 1974, resignation address:

Throughout the long and difficult period of Watergate, I have felt it was my duty to persevere, to make every effort possible to complete the term of office to which you have elected me. In the past few days, however, it has become evident to me that I no longer have a strong enough political base in the Congress to justify continuing that effort.84

This quotation reinforced the image of Nixon as a dutiful public servant striving to uphold his constitutional oath, regardless of the cost to himself. But “[a]s the reaction
to the release of the June 23rd transcripts mushroomed,” the narrative explained, “it became clear to the President that he no longer enjoyed the support he needed to carry on the fight for his Office.” This description blamed Nixon’s resignation on the mushrooming public response. The president was being acted upon by a driving force he could not control, a hysteria that would not be quelled. He would admit defeat, but not guilt. He could no longer “carry on the fight” to save his political life. The president “decided that he could not ask the nation to endure the agony of an impeachment debate in the House and a trial in the Senate. He saw that he had no alternative but to resign.” This decision was one motivated out of concern for the nation. In this retelling, Nixon was not guilty; he just did not want to put the nation through more pain and heartache. Instead, the president would sacrifice his political life so that the nation could move forward:

On Thursday evening August 8, 1974, in his thirty-seventh televised address to the nation, the thirty-seventh President announced his resignation. The following day, Vice President Ford took the oath of office to become the nation’s thirty-eighth president.

And with that, the exhibit narrative abruptly ended.

This sudden ending worked to accomplish Bostock’s goal for the exhibit: “That people will walk away from it, shaking their heads, and wondering how the nation ever let such a great President be taken away from them.” This language suggested that the nation had allowed Nixon to be taken away from them. Their eroding support and acquiescence to the political hysteria resulted in the former president’s resignation. Nixon, ever the public servant, had been gracious enough to bow out when he sensed the fight would only prolong the nation’s “agony.” There was no mention of Ford’s September 8, 1974, pardon of Nixon or the long-lasting ramifications of Watergate on U.S. public opinion and political culture. Instead, this conclusion portrayed Nixon’s political death as the result of a long, hard struggle to protect the presidency from judicial and congressional overreach, a battle he ultimately conceded for the good of the country.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that Nixon and post-presidential aide Bob Bostock designed the Watergate exhibit at the Nixon Library as an apologetic space that allowed the former president to speak in his own defense and to eulogize his political life. Throughout the Watergate gallery, the exhibit narrative presented Watergate as a series of small, seemingly unrelated events that Nixon’s political enemies blew out of proportion to undermine his presidency. This strategy of differentiation attempted to reduce the severity of what Nixon called “a very unpopular subject” and “make sense out of it” for the visitor. At the same time, the text positioned Nixon as an active, engaged leader at home and abroad. This bolstering strategy worked to transcend the particulars of Watergate by portraying Nixon as an honorable hero determined to defend the executive branch from congressional and judicial overreach. By employing these dual strategies of differentiation and transcendence, the Watergate
gallery set up Watergate as a “catch-word” for many smaller and unrelated issues and argued that Nixon’s response to Watergate was a part of a much more important goal: upholding his presidential oath to preserve, to protect, and to defend the Constitution of the United States. Ultimately, the narrative suggested that Nixon suspended his “final campaign” so that the country could move past Watergate. This final interpretation portrayed Nixon as fighting—and dying, thanks to the “smoking gun” recording obtained by violating his executive privilege—for the good of the nation. It could not have been lost on Nixon that this exhibit would be one of the last that visitors encountered before exiting the museum and moving outside to visit his gravesite. Even as the Watergate gallery provided a space for Nixon to defend his presidential legacy, it also was here that the master of self-defense could have the final say—or so he hoped. Retelling his version of Watergate was really Nixon’s final campaign, his attempt to reframe one of the greatest scandals in U.S. politics as a simple misunderstanding of a few words, spoken in private, one summer day in 1972.

The import of this study extends beyond Nixon and Watergate, however, in two specific ways. First, this analysis reveals how presidential libraries—as both storehouses of the public record and rhetorically constituted memory places—work as a posthumous extension of presidential speech. As I have demonstrated, Nixon saw the Watergate Exhibit as a unique opportunity to “[make] sense” out of “a very unpopular subject” and to issue his final apologia to the U.S. public. In the case of the Nixon Library, we see how Nixon’s obsession with controlling the historical record dictated the library’s portrayal of Watergate. Even after the National Archives assumed control of the Nixon Library in 2007 and revised the Watergate gallery in 2011, these two competing narratives—one according to Nixon and the other according to NARA—also provide a unique view of the former president, and one that reveals his determination to retell the story of Watergate “the way it should be told.” In his attempts to redeem his legacy in the public eye, Nixon still speaks—even from the grave.

Second, this analysis also suggests that rhetorical critics should consider the apologetic potential of certain memorial sites, particularly presidential libraries. Although there are several aspects that make the Nixon Library case study unique, other presidential libraries also feature museum galleries and exhibit spaces designed by the former president’s supporters and staff. This means that visitors to all presidential libraries encounter a particular retelling of history. If we extend our treatment of the apologetic genre to include spoken oratory and rhetorically constituted memory places, we should examine the self-defensive strategies these spaces employ to defend the president’s decisions while in office and even absolve them of guilt. This could include, for example, an analysis of the George W. Bush Library’s “Decision Points Theater.” In this interactive exhibit, visitors encounter one of four real-life scenarios—the invasion of Iraq, the 2007 troop surge, Hurricane Katrina, and the 2008 financial meltdown—and view prerecorded statements by military generals and White House staff members (played by actors) who provide commentary on the situation at hand. Individuals then are asked to select the best course of action based upon this information. After the participant votes are tallied, George W. Bush appears on screen.
to defend the choices he made in that particular instance. But the “Decision Points Theater” is just one recent example. Examining the self-defensive rhetorical strategies employed in presidential museums and other memorial sites can help us assess the kind of civic participation and democratic deliberation these spaces invite, discourage, or even silence. In this way, then, attending to the apologetic elements of these spaces reveals the promises and perils of presidential self-commemoration.

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Notes


[6] Nixon, Leaders, 344–345. After this passage, Nixon quoted the speech Theodore Roosevelt delivered in Paris, France, in which he praised the man in the arena. For a complete text of
Roosevelt’s address, see http://www.theodore-roosevelt.com/images/research/speeches/maninthearena.pdf. Roosevelt’s quote also is the epigraph for Nixon’s 1990 book, In the Arena: A Memoir of Victory, Defeat, and Renewal, in which Nixon chronicled his post-White House years (see Note 5 for the full citation).

[7] This action was in response to Nixon’s attempt to destroy all Watergate-related materials. The U.S. Congress passed the Presidential Recordings and Materials Preservation Act (PRMPA) on December 9, 1974. This act, signed into law by Gerald Ford 10 days later, transferred control of all Nixon administration tapes and documents to the U.S. government. Furious, Nixon sued the U.S. government for the right to these materials, arguing that PRMPA was unconstitutional because it granted Congress authority over materials related to the executive branch, thus violating the separation of powers, and because it superseded the right of executive privilege. However, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1977 that Nixon’s presidential papers would remain in the control of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). See Nixon v. Administrator of General Services, 433 U.S. 425, 439 (1977) and Nancy Kegan Smith and Gary M. Stern, “A Historical Review of Access to Records in Presidential Libraries,” The Public Historian 28, no. 3 (2006): 79–116.


[13] Ibid.

[14] I use the masculine pronoun here and throughout the rest of the article to reflect the current state of the presidential institution.


[19] Smith and Stern explain this public/private distinction, noting that Franklin D. Roosevelt inaugurated a “public/private partnership, in which the president voluntarily donated his papers, land, and a privately constructed building to the National Archives, which in turn would staff the library and make the president’s papers available in accordance with the terms of a deed of gift from the president.” See Smith and Stern, “A Historical Review,” 82.


[21] It is important to note how our contemporary understanding of the apologia is directly linked to Richard Nixon. Ware and Linkugel published their essay in the October 1973 issue


[23] Ibid., 280.

[24] Ibid., 281.

[25] Ibid., 281.

[26] Ibid., 281.

[27] Nixon, RN, 971.

[28] This refers to the June 23, 1972, tape recording that came to be known as the “smoking gun.” I discuss this conversation—and the Watergate exhibit’s portrayal of this conversation—below.


[33] I use this memorandum for my analysis because it provides Nixon’s handwritten comments and responses to Bostock’s text. A PDF of this document can be found at http://issuu.com/nixonfoundation/docs/watergateexhibit. For the final text and pictures of the original Watergate gallery, please visit http://www.nixonlibrary.gov/themuseum/exhibits/oldwatergatetour.php.

[34] Bostock “Memorandum for the President,” cover pages.

[35] Ibid., cover pages.

Although the gallery has 13 separate sections that chronicle the events of Watergate, for the sake of space I have limited my analysis to the portions that demonstrate how Nixon and Bostock relied on strategies of differentiation and transcendence to retell the events of Watergate. However, I invite readers to access the full text of the exhibit and look at pictures of the original gallery at http://www.nixonlibrary.gov/themuseum/exhibits/oldwatergatetour.php.

According to Stanley Kutler, “No direct evidence exists demonstrating that Nixon knew the particulars of these plans; still, he constantly pressed his men for intelligence” that might help his presidential campaign. See Stanley I. Kutler, Abuse of Power: The New Nixon Tapes (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 44.

Dean’s book is particularly helpful here because it provides a history of the internal workings of the Nixon Administration from June 20, 1972, to July 16, 1973, using the White House tape transcripts as its main source of evidence.


Ibid., 75–76; Schudson, Watergate in American Memory: How We Remember, Forget, and Reconstruct the Past, 17.

[67] Ibid., 8.
[68] Ibid., 9.
[69] Ibid., 10.
[70] Ibid., 10.
[71] Ibid., 13.
[72] Ibid., 22.
[76] Ibid., 237.
[77] Bostock, “Memorandum for the President,” 23.
[78] Ibid., 23.
[82] Ibid., 29.
[85] Ibid., 30.
[86] Ibid., 30.
[87] Ibid., 30.
[88] Ibid., cover pages.
[91] See U.S. Constitution, art. 2, sec. 1, cl. 8 for the full presidential oath of office.
[94] Bostock, “Memorandum to the President,” cover pages.