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ARTICLE

Mary McCarthy and the Watergate Crisis

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Abstract

Watergate is conventionally understood through insider narratives about its complex daily churn as an unfolding political scandal. But the crisis also drove broader theoretical debates about democracy and the state in 1970s America. This article offers the first sustained account of Mary McCarthy's Watergate writings. She theorized Watergate as a stark legitimacy crisis that revolved around the relationship between democracy and totalitarianism. Through dialogues with Hannah Arendt and others, McCarthy argued that Watergate turned politically on the public's ability to unmask and contest the power of totalitarian state actors. By rejecting tragedy as a conceptual framework for Watergate, and by recentring the state in debates about US totalitarianism, McCarthy's work shows how and why interactions between public opinion and state power could advance both democratic and anti-democratic politics.

In May 1973, the American writer Mary McCarthy was gripped and chilled by Watergate. 'There's a limit to what I can absorb of newsprint on the subject', she told her friend Hannah Arendt. 'But Nixon's recent 4,000 word statement is perhaps the most revealing thing about the whole business.' The president denied prior knowledge of the June 1972 burglary at opposition party offices and its cover-up by White House staff. Invoking the needs of 'national security', Nixon defended plans for domestic surveillance and claimed that he never pressured the CIA to obstruct FBI Watergate inquiries. McCarthy stressed to Arendt that his 'true political aim' was nothing less than 'a police state, with rival security networks spying not only on citizens but on each other. When I read [Nixon's statement]', she added, 'I immediately thought of *The Origins of T[otalitarianism]*.'[1] Watergate raised a series of conceptual questions for McCarthy. What lay beneath Nixon's claims and power? Could the United States become a totalitarian regime? And what did the crisis ultimately mean?

As the best-known political scandal in twentieth-century US history, Watergate is conventionally understood through insider narratives about who knew what and when they knew it. The most influential book on the subject remains Bob Woodward

[1]Mary McCarthy to Hannah Arendt, 27 May 1973, in *Between friends: the correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, 1949–1975*, ed. Carol Brightman (New York, NY, 1995), pp. 336–7. For the statement, see Richard Nixon, 'Statements about the Watergate investigations', 22 May 1973, at www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/255497 [accessed 16 June 2026].

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and Carl Bernstein's *All the president's men* (1974), a classic political thriller about exposing White House crimes.[2] Still a key source of journalistic legend and historical memory, the Woodward and Bernstein version of Watergate provides what Garry Wills called a 'cops-and-robbers story meticulously told'.[3] But this narrative framework can limit historical understanding of Watergate's deeper stakes and contested meanings. Building on and challenging aspects of *All the president's men*, scholars have shown how the crisis mattered for American constitutional history, and why its media history was more complex and less heroic than legend suggests.[4] Political historians in particular have shown how Watergate reflected shifting patterns of party support, executive power, and bureaucratic conflict.[5] These institutional studies have enriched the historiography, and focus now falls on state actors rather than journalists. Nevertheless, an insider narrative perspective continues to animate histories of the crisis. The best recent synthesis offers a comprehensive chronicle of Watergate's high politics.[6]

But for many Americans in the 1970s, Watergate mattered as a broader crisis of democratic legitimacy. Beneath its complex daily churn, the core issues were less about who knew what and when than about the basic political character of American democracy and the American state. For exploring these issues, the ideas of writers like McCarthy are helpful. The intellectual history of Watergate has not been seriously examined, but it can reveal a wider range of perspectives than insider narratives sustain.[7] Not simply a scandal or saga, Watergate formed a fulcrum of American political thinking and produced a large textual archive.[8] By analyzing contemporary debates about the state, rather than shifting alignments within it,

[2]Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, *All the president's men* (New York, NY, 1974); Michael Schudson, *Watergate in American memory: how we remember, forget, and reconstruct the past* (New York, NY, 1992), pp. 20–1; Mark Feldstein, 'Wallowing in Watergate: historiography, methodology, and mythology in journalism's celebrated moment', *American Journalism*, 31 (2014), pp. 550–70, at pp. 553–4.

[3]Garry Wills, 'The kingdom of heaven', *New York Review of Books*, 13 June 1974, pp. 6–8, at p. 8.

[4]The classic work of constitutional history is Stanley I. Kutler, *The wars of Watergate: the last crisis of Richard Nixon* (1990; New York, NY, 1992). On the complexities of Watergate's media history, see Jon Marshall, *Watergate's legacy and the press: the investigative impulse* (Evanston, IL, 2011); W. Joseph Campbell, *Getting it wrong: debunking the greatest myths in American journalism* (2010; 2nd edn., Oakland, CA, 2017), pp. 150–64; Feldstein, 'Wallowing in Watergate', pp. 565–9; Kathryn Cramer Brownell, 'Watergate, the bipartisan struggle for media access, and the growth of cable television', *Modern American History*, 3 (2020), pp. 175–98.

[5]Ruth P. Morgan, 'Nixon, Watergate, and the study of the presidency', *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 26 (1996), pp. 217–38; Beverly Gage, 'Deep Throat, Watergate, and the bureaucratic politics of the FBI', *Journal of Policy History*, 24 (2012), pp. 157–83; Michael A. Genovese and Iwan W. Morgan, eds., *Watergate remembered: the legacy for American politics* (New York, NY, 2012); Michael Koncewicz, *They said no to Nixon: Republicans who stood up to the president's abuses of power* (Oakland, CA, 2018).

[6]Garrett M. Graff, *Watergate: a new history* (New York, NY, 2022).

[7]A recent exception is Colin Kidd, 'All the abbess's nuns: Muriel Spark and the idioms of Watergate', in *The crooked dividend: essays on Muriel Spark*, eds. Gerard Carruthers and Helen Stoddart (Glasgow, 2022), pp. 126–43. Beyond the paucity of particular case studies, Watergate is marginal to wider intellectual histories of the period like J. David Hoeveler Jr., *The postmodernist turn: American thought and culture in the 1970s* (New York, NY, 1996); Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of fracture* (Cambridge, MA, 2011). Andreas Killen, *1973 nervous breakdown: Watergate, Warhol, and the birth of post-sixties America* (New York, NY, 2006), provides a vivid cultural history that weaves Watergate into a chronicle of the year 1973.

[8]For a sense of the archive's scale, see Myron J. Smith Jr., *Watergate: an annotated bibliography of sources in English, 1972–1982* (Metuchen, NJ, 1983).

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historians can access the deeper questions Watergate raised. In McCarthy's case, Watergate became a way to think about the relationship between democracy and totalitarianism. She covered the Senate Watergate hearings for *The Observer* of London and *The New York Review of Books*. She revised and expanded her pieces for book publication as *The mask of state: Watergate portraits* (1974).[9]

This article offers the first sustained account of McCarthy's Watergate writings. She has long been seen as a significant American intellectual and studied in relation to women's subjectivity and sexuality.[10] But despite growing interest in her critique of the Vietnam War, McCarthy's political journalism has attracted less attention than her fiction and literary criticism.[11] This is a shame. *The mask of state* matters for its emblematic and influential account of Watergate as a legitimacy crisis, and for its distinctive theoretical analysis of Nixon and his men as totalitarian state actors. Eschewing insider narratives, McCarthy framed Watergate through conflicts between the broad American public and what she saw as an emerging totalitarian state. Engaging with Arendt's ideas, McCarthy also developed incisive critiques of state deception and public apathy during the Senate hearings. Her work reached mass and elite audiences and provoked various responses from readers. Both for the analytic content of her writing and for its reception and impact, McCarthy provides an important case study in the intellectual history of Watergate.

Beyond the crisis itself, McCarthy shaped wider debates about totalitarianism in America. She thought Watergate foreshadowed an American state with unchecked executive power, a depoliticized public, continuous domestic surveillance, political control of the secret police, persecution for opposition forces, and open criminality in the governing elite. McCarthy thus illuminates the role of state power and deception in debates about US totalitarianism. Before the 1970s these debates centred on concepts of mass society, with figures like Norman Mailer stressing the dangers of cultural and psychological conformity.[12] After engaging sympathetically with mass society analyses, McCarthy came to argue that authoritarian state power was crucial for American totalitarianism, and that public opinion could actively or passively

[9]Mary McCarthy, *The mask of state: Watergate portraits* (1974; New York, NY, 1975). Harcourt Brace Jovanovich published the first edition in 1974, but the 1975 paperback contains a 'postscript on the pardon' so citations are from this edition.

[10]Carol Gelderman, *Mary McCarthy: a life* (New York, NY, 1988); Carol Brightman, *Writing dangerously: Mary McCarthy and her world* (New York, NY, 1992); Sabrina Fuchs Abrams, *Mary McCarthy: gender, politics, and the postwar intellectual* (New York, NY, 2004); Sam Reese, 'Renaissance women: Brigid Brophy, Mary McCarthy, and the public intellectual', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 12 (2018), pp. 207–21; Ronnie A. Grinberg, *Write like a man: Jewish masculinity and the New York intellectuals* (Princeton, NJ, 2024), pp. 52–5, 177–82. See also two special journal issues on McCarthy: *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 15 (2004), pp. 1–101; *Women's Studies*, 49 (2020), pp. 347–461.

[11]Sabrina Fuchs Abrams, 'Women on war: Mary McCarthy, Susan Sontag, and Diana Trilling debate the Vietnam War', *Women's Studies*, 37 (2008), pp. 987–1007; Patricia Owens, Katharina Rietzler, Kimberly Hutchings, and Sarah C. Dunstan, eds., *Women's international thought: towards a new canon* (Cambridge, 2022), pp. 121–6. For brief accounts of her Watergate journalism, see Gelderman, *Mary McCarthy*, pp. 315–17; Brightman, *Writing dangerously*, pp. 568–70; Abrams, *Mary McCarthy*, p. 89.

[12]Sophie Joscelyne, 'Norman Mailer and American totalitarianism in the 1960s', *Modern Intellectual History*, 19 (2022), pp. 241–67, at pp. 247–9. On the broader conceptual history of totalitarianism, the best starting point is Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: the inner history of the Cold War* (New York, NY, 1995).

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support totalitarian state forms.[13] She framed the public as politically variable and capable of advancing both democratic and anti-democratic projects. This variability defined her vision of Watergate.

Rejecting dominant frameworks of tragedy for understanding the crisis, McCarthy ultimately saw Watergate as a mirror for American democracy. At once revealing and disturbing, Watergate in her view reflected the dynamic relationship between public opinion and state power. To explore McCarthy's ideas, this article first surveys her engagements with Nixon and totalitarianism before Watergate. Second, it examines her case for democratic renewal as the Senate hearings began. Third, it considers her critique of Nixon's men as totalitarian state actors. Fourth, it discusses Watergate's ending and the reach and reception of McCarthy's writing.

I

McCarthy remained a force in American intellectual life for much of the twentieth century. Born in 1912, she graduated from Vassar in 1933, moved to New York City, and began reviewing books for *The Nation* and *The New Republic*. Mobilized politically by the Moscow show trials, McCarthy joined the anti-Stalinist left at *Partisan Review* as the magazine's theatre critic.[14] She became a key figure among the New York intellectuals.[15] Her fiction depicted folly and hypocrisy in fellow writers, which partly explains why male colleagues often dismissed her politics.[16] But McCarthy was in fact a consistently political writer, both in her fiction and in her journalism. She followed public affairs, cared about elections and politicians, participated in protests, and made various political arguments. In broad ideological terms McCarthy was a left liberal who opposed communism, valued dissent and critical independence, and kept herself open to radical ideas. One interlocutor was the Italian anarcho-pacificist Nicola Chiaromonte, whose utopian critiques of the state helped shape McCarthy's interest in libertarian socialism.[17] Another influence was the radical humanist Dwight Macdonald, for whose magazine *politics* she also wrote.

Arendt was the major influence on McCarthy's political thinking. They met in 1944 and built a close personal and intellectual friendship.[18] When *The origins of totalitarianism* appeared in 1951, McCarthy read the book 'in the bathtub, riding in the car, waiting in line in the grocery store'. Deeply impressed, her sole criticism to Arendt was that *Origins* felt overdetermined in parts: 'the implication you make ...

[13]This kind of state-focused argument is usually associated with the 1930s and 1940s, but McCarthy shows how it persisted well into the 1970s. On interwar anti-totalitarianism, see e.g. Benjamin L. Alpers, *Dictators, democracy, and American public culture: envisioning the totalitarian enemy, 1920s–1950s* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003); David Ciepley, *Liberalism in the shadow of totalitarianism* (Cambridge, MA, 2006).

[14]Brightman, *Writing dangerously*, pp. 127–50.

[15]For an entry point to the literature on this group, see Neil Jumonville, *Critical crossings: the New York intellectuals in postwar America* (Berkeley, CA, 1991). On McCarthy's model of the intellectual, see Abrams, *Mary McCarthy*, p. 110.

[16]E.g. Alfred Kazin: 'she could belong to a radical movement only when it was in decay and objectively ridiculous' (quoted in Brightman, *Writing dangerously*, p. 221).

[17]Abrams, *Mary McCarthy*, pp. 54–6.

[18]Brightman, 'Introduction: an epistolary romance', in *Between Friends*, pp. vii–xxx; Deborah Nelson, 'The virtues of heartlessness: Mary McCarthy, Hannah Arendt, and the anesthetics of empathy', *American Literary History*, 18 (2006), pp. 86–101.

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that totalitarianism is a scheme in the minds of certain displaced men to rob other men of their sense of reality seems to me to scant the element of the fortuitous in the development of this whole phenomenon'.[19] Other readers shared this concern.[20] But Arendt's book enthralled McCarthy, convincing her that totalitarianism was the worst political threat in modern history. In particular McCarthy admired its sections on South Africa, Disraeli, and 'the structure of the totalitarian movement, with the fellow-travelers representing "reality" to the members, the members to the cadre, and so on'.[21]

In mid-century America, debates about totalitarianism often focused on concepts of mass society.[22] Arendt thought social atomization and alienation were crucial for totalitarianism, but she doubted that American life had been fully captured by these forces.[23] McCarthy saw totalitarian features in US anti-communism, but she rejected the view that American society at large was moving towards fascism or totalitarianism.[24] When Simone de Beauvoir stressed the conformity and loneliness of US social life, McCarthy attacked her analysis.[25] '[Beauvoir] talks a great deal of American conformity but fails to recognize a thing that Tocqueville saw long ago', McCarthy wrote; 'that this conformity is the expression of a predominantly middle-class society; it is the price paid (as yet) for the spread of plenty.' McCarthy argued that America was not defined by totalitarian alienation but had realized 'the economic and social goals of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and of progressive thought in general'.[26] She defended forms of New Deal liberalism and broadly accepted the embrace of American life among New York intellectuals at this conjuncture. *Partisan Review* in spring 1952 ran its famous symposium on 'Our country and our culture'.[27]

McCarthy changed her mind about the plausibility of American totalitarianism after watching Richard Nixon in the 1952 election. As the Republican vice presidential candidate, Nixon defended himself from corruption charges in the 'Checkers speech', a famous television performance that projected democratic authenticity. Detailing his strained finances and hardscrabble childhood, Nixon had people like McCarthy in his sights: cosmopolitan elites who lived in big cities and looked down on ordinary citizens.[28] The speech generated public support for Nixon

[19]McCarthy to Arendt, 26 Apr. 1951, in *Between friends*, pp. 1–3.

[20]Richard H. King, *Arendt and America* (Chicago, IL, 2015), pp. 58–9.

[21]McCarthy to Arendt, 26 Apr. 1951. On anti-totalitarianism and the New York intellectuals, see Jumonville, *Critical crossings*, pp. xiii, 64–9.

[22]Gleason, *Totalitarianism*, pp. 109–10; Casey Nelson Blake, Daniel H. Borus, and Howard Brick, *At the center: American thought and culture in the mid-twentieth century* (Lanham, MD, 2020), pp. 75–7, 102; Dorothy Ross, 'Whatever happened to the social in American social thought? part 1', *Modern Intellectual History*, 18 (2021), pp. 1155–77, at pp. 1171–5; Joscelyne, 'Norman Mailer', pp. 247–9.

[23]Hannah Arendt, *The origins of totalitarianism* (1951; rev. edn., New York, NY, 1973), p. 317; King, *Arendt and America*, pp. 65, 118–19.

[24]On the ironically totalitarian nature of US anti-communism, see Mary McCarthy, 'No news, or, what killed the dog', *Reporter*, 8 July 1952, in McCarthy, *On the contrary* (New York, NY, 1961), pp. 32–42, at 41.

[25]Simone de Beauvoir, *America day by day*, trans. Carol Cosman (1948; London, 1998), pp. 375–7.

[26]Mary McCarthy, 'Mlle. Gulliver en Amérique', *Reporter*, 22 Jan. 1952, in *On the contrary*, pp. 24–31, at pp. 28, 31.

[27]Brightman, *Writing dangerously*, pp. 337–8, 351; Jumonville, *Critical crossings*, pp. 90–1.

[28]Richard Nixon, 'Address of Senator Nixon to the American people: the "Checkers speech"', 23 Sep. 1952, at www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/270215 [accessed 16 June 2026].

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and deep anxiety among liberals, who saw him as manipulative and demagogic.[29] McCarthy went further by seeing Nixon specifically as totalitarian. 'The Nixon success, if it's really serious, is too horribly Orwellian to contemplate', she wrote to Arendt; 'it would mean that mass society is a reality.' Having recently criticized Beauvoir on conformity, McCarthy now worried that Nixon represented a totalitarian breakthrough in American politics. By manipulating public opinion with televised imagery, Nixon seemed 'in a way more terrifying than any of the successes of Nazi or Soviet propaganda, which after all are based on *something*', McCarthy stressed, 'on deteriorated ideologies, national interests, primitive mysticism, and on the *fact* of a dictatorship'. But Nixon's mobilization of mere 'advertising techniques ... blows all my conceptions of U.S. life sky-high'.[30]

After the Republicans won the election, McCarthy continued to worry about US totalitarianism. She now agreed that mass society had totalitarian dimensions, and thought public opinion should be mobilized against totalitarian politicians. To this end McCarthy planned a new magazine, *The Critic*, and raised funds of $55,000 for the project.[31] Outlining its editorial line, she wrote that *The Critic* would 'fix its attention on totalitarian elements present in America, as well as abroad, and by this I mean mass-culture, Henry Luce, radio, television, Nixon, Whittaker Chambers', and much else.[32] The magazine never materialized, but McCarthy did persuade Arendt to review Chambers's memoir *Witness* (1952) as a totalitarian book.[33] In the late 1950s McCarthy began to engage with republican political theory, and to conceive democracy in terms of public reason and civic virtue. A key text here was Arendt's *The human condition* (1958), which prized 'the words and deeds of the public realm', as McCarthy wrote in her review, 'where men inter*act* with each other'.[34] McCarthy read Machiavelli closely when writing a travel book on Florence.[35] She also taught some of Arendt's Machiavelli seminars at Wesleyan University.[36] By the 1960s McCarthy had moved to Paris.

Norman Mailer developed one of the most influential critiques of American totalitarianism in this period.[37] By radicalizing concepts of mass society, Mailer defined totalitarian power in America as essentially a conformist social psychology. Having attacked celebrations of 'Our country and our culture', he argued that US totalitarianism flourished not in the state but throughout cultural life. This view shaped Mailer's notorious review of *The group* (1963), McCarthy's bestselling novel about

[29]Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: the rise of a president and the fracturing of America* (New York, NY, 2008), pp. 36–43; David Greenberg, *Nixon's shadow: the history of an image* (New York, NY, 2003), pp. 52–4.

[30]McCarthy to Arendt, 7 Oct. 1952, in *Between friends*, pp. 9–10. Emphasis in original. Arendt's reply is not extant.

[31]Jumonville, *Critical crossings*, p. 80.

[32]McCarthy to Richard Rovere et al., 4 Dec. 1952, quoted in Abrams, *Mary McCarthy*, p. 63.

[33]McCarthy to Arendt, 2 and 23 Dec. 1952, in *Between friends*, pp. 10–13; Arendt, 'Ex-communists remain totalitarian at heart', *Washington Post*, 3 May 1953, p. b3.

[34]Mary McCarthy, 'The *vita activa*', *New Yorker*, 18 Oct. 1958, in *On the contrary*, pp. 155–64, at p. 156. Emphasis in original.

[35]Mary McCarthy, *The stones of Florence* (1959), in McCarthy, *The stones of Florence and Venice observed* (New York, NY, 1972), pp. 11–169, at pp. 54–5, 77, 141–3, 152.

[36]Brightman, *Writing dangerously*, p. 470.

[37]This paragraph builds on Joscelyne, 'Norman Mailer', pp. 249, 253–4, 261–3.

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Vassar graduates in 1930s New York. Alongside his aversion to her 'lady-book', Mailer thought McCarthy had missed the revolutionary potential of the 1930s by focusing on conformist women from the upper middle class. He framed McCarthy as 'not close enough to the horror' of American society, and thus as complicit in the cultural totalitarianism that suffused it.[38] McCarthy was furious with Mailer, both for his misogyny and because she wrote *The group* in a humanistic anti-totalitarian vein. For Mailer, the 1930s constituted a heroic and romantic era, which created a radical American public that Cold War conditions then ruined. He could not accept McCarthy's claim that 'ladies' were part of the public, and he did not engage with *The group*'s complex portrait of the New Deal.[39]

Where Mailer identified US totalitarianism with culture and social psychology, McCarthy insisted that it also depended on state power and politicians like Nixon. Partly because of these differences, Mailer wrote little about Watergate. In 1973 he announced plans for a 'democratic secret police', to be called the 'fifth estate', but this never got off the ground.[40] After attending some of the Senate Watergate hearings, Mailer told *The Village Voice* that they were 'boring'.[41] He soon abandoned the subject and focused on a biography of Marilyn Monroe.[42] In contrast McCarthy cared much about Watergate because she already saw Nixon as totalitarian and paid attention to government. Bringing the state back in to debates about US totalitarianism, she came to analyze the contingent relationship between state actors and the broader public.

'Nixon is getting more ominous', McCarthy warned Arendt just before he won the presidency in 1968.[43] Then a prominent critic of the Vietnam War, McCarthy wrote most about public opinion and US foreign policy. She reported from Saigon and Hanoi for *The New York Review of Books*, and covered the court-martial of Ernest Medina for *The New Yorker*. Medina had commanded the army unit that committed the My Lai massacre. McCarthy saw his trial as testing the public's response to state violence. Were military officers accountable for war crimes, or would citizens tolerate atrocity? When Medina was acquitted, McCarthy argued that 'it was public opinion and not the jury that decided' because too few Americans truly opposed the war.[44] And if the public accepted Medina's innocence, what lesser crimes might it permit? Nixon was re-elected in November 1972 with a large popular majority. That

[38]Norman Mailer, 'The Mary McCarthy case', *New York Review of Books*, 17 Oct. 1963, in Mailer, *Collected essays of the 1960s*, ed. J. Michael Lennon (New York, NY, 2018), pp. 216–25, at pp. 216, 223. As well as connecting Mailer's review to debates about totalitarianism, my account follows Brenda Murphy, 'The thirties, public and private: a reassessment of Mary McCarthy's *The group*', *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 15 (2004), pp. 81–101; Justin David Mitchell, 'Norman Mailer and "The Mary McCarthy case" revisited', *Post45*, 4 (2020), at www.post45.org/2020/01/norman-mailer-and-the-mary-mccarthy-case-revisited/ [accessed 16 June 2026].

[39]E.g. Mary McCarthy, *The group* (London, 1963), pp. 12–13, 26–7, 137–40, 326.

[40]Joscelyne, 'Norman Mailer', pp. 266–7.

[41]Frank Crowther, 'Mailer's 5th estate: who's paranoid now?', *Village Voice*, 12 July 1973, at www.villagevoice.com/mailers-5th-estate-whos-paranoid-now/ [accessed 16 June 2026].

[42]But on Watergate's role in his Monroe project, see Oline Eaton, "'Watergate-ing" Norman Mailer's *Marilyn*: life writing in cultural context', *Life Writing*, 16 (2019), pp. 261–77.

[43]McCarthy to Arendt, 22 Oct. 1968, in *Between friends*, p. 223.

[44]Mary McCarthy, *The seventeenth degree* (New York, NY, 1974), p. 384. This volume collects her Vietnam writings.

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June burglars had broken into Democratic Party headquarters in the Watergate complex on behalf of the Committee to Re-elect the President (CRP). The White House began to cover this up just after their arrest.

Much of McCarthy's political thought focused on relations between the public and the state. Contesting the view that mass society alone created American totalitarianism, she stressed the significance of state actors in general and Nixon in particular. Building on theories of republican citizenship, McCarthy thought democracy required a broad public commitment to deliberative self-government. In the months before Nixon's Checkers speech, McCarthy had argued that 'common sense' was 'the rationale of a democracy', and that 'a belief in common sense is the informing spirit of all democratic institutions, from the jury system to universal suffrage'.[45] During Watergate it was the interaction between state power and public opinion that most engaged McCarthy. What kind of public did Watergate produce? How could it cope with Nixon's crimes?

II

McCarthy arrived in Washington for the Senate Watergate hearings in June 1973. She stayed at the Watergate hotel, where Arendt sent flowers for her sixty-first birthday.[46] The food was bad, there was no bookstore in the mall, and to McCarthy's Parisian eye the architecture seemed 'pathetically suburban and middle-American'.[47] But she was pleased to be in the thick of things. McCarthy liked a courtroom drama, and her work in fiction and theatre criticism helped for covering Watergate. A minor celebrity in the Senate hearings, McCarthy sat among the press and took notes 'continuously in a small, dense hand', according to *The New Yorker*.[48]

The crisis was full-blown. What began with the break-in had become a broad public reckoning with issues of executive power, domestic surveillance, and democratic legitimacy. Amid the Watergate revelations, it emerged that Nixon had worked to enhance White House control of FBI and CIA operations, and that he wanted more intelligence on US citizens and especially personal enemies. For example, the 1970 Huston plan aimed to deepen presidential direction of domestic espionage and override civil liberties objections in the name of national security.[49] The Kissinger wiretaps illegally spied on journalists and officials in an effort to stop press leaks.[50] And 'the plumbers', a White House covert operations unit with CIA connections, had raided the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist after the Pentagon Papers were published.[51] So the Watergate burglary was part of a pattern. McCarthy saw the cover-up not as normal corruption but as the state's concealment of subversion and

[45]Mary McCarthy, 'The contagion of ideas', lecture delivered summer 1952, in *On the contrary*, pp. 43–54, at p. 48.

[46]Arendt to McCarthy, 21 June 1973, in *Between friends*, p. 338.

[47]McCarthy, *Mask of state*, p. 23.

[48]Hendrik Hertzberg, 'The talk of the town: Dean's first day', *New Yorker*, 9 July 1973, p. 22.

[49]For details, see J. Anthony Lukas, *Nightmare: the underside of the Nixon years* (1976; Athens, OH, 1999), pp. 30–9; Kutler, *Wars of Watergate*, pp. 96–100; Graff, *Watergate*, pp. 40–52, 387–8. The plan was not implemented because of opposition from J. Edgar Hoover: see Gage, 'Deep Throat', pp. 158–61, 173–6.

[50]Graff, *Watergate*, pp. 14–15, 73–5.

[51]Kutler, *Wars of Watergate*, pp. 111–16.

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criminality. She thought Watergate had exposed Nixon's plan for a totalitarian state with political control of the secret police and executive contempt for the rule of law.

This seemed clear from the testimony of Jeb Stuart Magruder, former CRP deputy director. After implicating senior White House staff in the burglary and cover-up, Magruder defended their actions by claiming that Nixon's critics also broke the law. 'He sought understanding for the "psychology" that prevailed in the White House', McCarthy reported, 'and that psychology, in turn, he blamed on radicals and dissenters.' Magruder exposed the administration's hostility to the basic norm that protest and opposition were part of democratic liberty. 'He still cannot discern a difference', McCarthy stressed, 'between open civil disobedience with its long American tradition going back to the Boston Tea Party and the purely expedient covert criminality of Watergate.'[52] Nor did Magruder recognize that executive officials should implement rather than break the law. Sam Ervin, chair of the Senate Watergate committee, compared the White House culture Magruder described with the Huston plan, which he had condemned for its 'Gestapo mentality'.[53] McCarthy idolized Ervin as 'virtually Shakespearean'.[54] She dedicated *The mask of state* to him.

McCarthy wanted to establish Nixon's men as totalitarian figures who aimed to deceive the public and subvert democracy. The most sinister figure in the Watergate drama, she thought, was the senior Nixon fixer Charles Colson. A key strategist for the 1972 landslide, Colson was involved with abortive schemes to kill a journalist and firebomb a think tank.[55] He was also involved with Nixon's 'Political Enemies Project', a list of administration critics singled out for harassment and surveillance.[56] McCarthy came to see Colson as '*the* key figure who could have unlocked the mystery, if there really is one, of who ordered the Watergate break-ins'.[57] He defended Nixon with pugnacious euphemism. When Colson said on television that Nixon's enemies project 'was just a list we kept of people not to ask to White House functions', McCarthy countered that it was actually 'a political-murder instrument ... Compare the "Final Solution"', she even suggested, '*toutes proportions gardées*, naturally.'[58] At once shocking and flippant, this suggestion framed Watergate in the starkest possible terms.

Despite the administration's deceptions, McCarthy was initially optimistic about Watergate's democratic potential. She regretted that Colson never testified and thought seeing him stonewall 'would have been educational for the public'.[59] More broadly McCarthy saw the Senate hearings as mobilizing public opinion and enhancing political education. The Senate caucus room was busy with citizens, she observed: 'teen-agers, small children (I have not yet seen a baby), priests, old women in aluminum walkers, one or two mad people in crazed costumes'. The bustling crowd reminded her 'of the Sistine Chapel'. She described the citizens in the Senate

[52]McCarthy, *Mask of state*, p. 16.

[53]Kutler, *Wars of Watergate*, pp. 101, 357.

[54]McCarthy, *Mask of state*, p. 10.

[55]Theodore H. White, *The making of the president 1972* (London, 1973), p. 51; Graff, *Watergate*, pp. 69–70, 135–7. The journalist was Jack Anderson; the think tank was Brookings.

[56]Kutler, *Wars of Watergate*, pp. 104–5; Graff, *Watergate*, pp. 87–9.

[57]McCarthy, *Mask of state*, p. 126. Emphasis in original.

[58]Ibid., p. 42.

[59]Ibid., p. 128.

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as 'serious, almost grave ... as though they were a self-elected jury'.[60] In McCarthy's view, the Watergate public combined representative and direct forms of democracy, fusing institutions like the Senate and jury. 'The public is almost half the story', she told her *Observer* editor Peter Crookston, 'representing a unique American quasi-parliamentary democracy'.[61] From this perspective, Congress both represented and invigorated public opinion, but citizens also constituted a self-authorizing body.

Here was a maximalist republican vision of the democratic nation. McCarthy claimed that the whole American public engaged in continuous deliberative judgement about Watergate. From New York to California, 'the story was being told, democratically, to the entire population, which was discussing it, democratically, as if at a town meeting'.[62] McCarthy insisted that 'everybody has been fully participating', and that 'intent spectators in the Senate Caucus Room are the delegates of a much larger assembly that is watching and judging in homes, offices, campuses, factories'.[63] In other words, Watergate had created the conditions for an ideal democratic republic. Avoiding differences between ancient city states and modern commercial societies, McCarthy celebrated Watergate's revival of civic virtue in 1970s America.[64] Against distinctions between direct and representative democracy, she framed citizens as simultaneously represented in Congress and directly participating in politics. McCarthy saw the Watergate public as rational, critical, and national. It could speak and act for itself, as well as through politicians. It held out hope for a more democratic American state.

There were problems with this vision. While McCarthy framed the Watergate public as a universal political subject, she engaged little with issues of inclusion, exclusion, and civic inequality. Black Americans figure uneasily in *The mask of state* as hotel workers and taxi drivers.[65] McCarthy noted but did not analyze their partial and liminal presence in political Washington. Her work in this way exemplified 'the lack of Black characters in the many segments of the [Watergate] story' that the sociologist Gloria Joseph analyzed in 1973. Joseph saw 'the idolizing of Senator Sam Ervin' as particularly ironic, given his ardent opposition to civil rights legislation. She argued more generally that Watergate revealed what African Americans already knew about the American state. 'Black people have long been on the receiving end of the repressive tactics of those in power', Joseph wrote, 'but it is only when repression is felt by white America that it becomes a problem, and people become concerned

[60]Ibid., p. 8.

[61]McCarthy to Peter Crookston, 4 July 1973, Mary McCarthy papers, Vassar College Library, box 53, folder 6 (hereafter MMP box/folder).

[62]McCarthy, *Mask of state*, p. 3.

[63]Ibid., p. 9.

[64]For a more pessimistic republican view, see the implicit and explicit Watergate references in J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian moment: Florentine political thought and the Atlantic republican tradition* (Princeton, NJ, 1975), pp. 506–52, at pp. 543–5, 548, 551. On Pocock's engagement with Arendt and Watergate, see Mira L. Siegelberg, 'Things fall apart: J. G. A. Pocock, Hannah Arendt, and the politics of time', *Modern Intellectual History*, 10 (2013), pp. 109–34.

[65]McCarthy, *Mask of state*, pp. 24, 38.

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about a rising trend toward fascism'.[66] Illustrating these concerns, McCarthy mostly ignored race in her analysis of authoritarian state power and democratic resistance.

McCarthy also developed a wishful account of Watergate journalism. She argued that print media was crucial for democratic deliberation, and that Watergate had revived the public's interest in newspapers. 'People were buying not one but two or even three [newspapers], plus *Time* and *Newsweek*', she claimed. 'On airplanes I watched the silent majority, vociferous as usual, turn first to the news pages and *then* to the sports pages.'[67] But on the ground the reality was that television drove public engagement with Watergate. Though print journalists were crucial in reporting the crisis, Watergate became nationally dominant through gavel-to-gavel television broadcasts of the Senate hearings.[68] McCarthy found it 'surprising how faithfully and closely these televised hearings are followed', and stressed the primacy of print: 'without the supplement of the daily newspaper and the weekly news magazines, it is doubtful whether the public would have been up to the televised spectacle'.[69]

Indeed, Watergate made it seem to McCarthy 'as though Marshall McLuhan had never been thought of and we were back in the Gutenberg Galaxy'.[70] McLuhan was a media theorist and technological determinist. He thought printing through moveable type had effectively 'created THE PUBLIC', and saw modern nation states as products of print technology.[71] Because he saw democratic politics as declining with radio and television, McLuhan framed Watergate not as a legitimacy crisis but as normal electronic surveillance.[72] He found television protean and interesting, and thought Nixon was bad at the medium.[73] On each of these points McCarthy reversed McLuhan: print media still mattered, the democratic nation remained powerful, and Nixon's power relied upon television. 'Nixon is a television creation', she argued, 'a sort of gesturing phantom, uncomfortable in the old-fashioned world of printer's type.' While television 'can be controlled and manipulated', print was at some level uncontrollable, 'as has been demonstrated in the Soviet Union'.[74]

Notwithstanding the limits to her claims about democracy and journalism, McCarthy's approach to Watergate enabled a focus on the contingent relationship between public opinion and totalitarianism. What she wanted to explore were two political formations in conflict with each other: a democratic public reading newspapers and building civic virtue, and a totalitarian state with lying elites and televised propaganda. As the Senate hearings continued, McCarthy analyzed the public's

[66]Gloria Joseph, 'The white cast of the Watergate', *Bill of Rights Journal*, Dec. 1973, pp. 8–14, at pp. 8–9, 11. On Ervin's racism and opposition to civil rights, see Karl E. Campbell, *Senator Sam Ervin, last of the founding fathers* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007), pp. 132–60.

[67]McCarthy, *Mask of state*, p. 4. Emphasis in original.

[68]Brownell, 'Watergate', pp. 175–7, 186–7. See also Brownell, *24/7 politics: cable television and the fragmenting of America from Watergate to Fox News* (Princeton, NJ, 2023).

[69]McCarthy, *Mask of state*, pp. 7–8.

[70]Ibid., p. 4.

[71]Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg galaxy: the making of typographic man* (Toronto, 1962), unpaginated preface.

[72]Marshall McLuhan, 'Mr. Nixon and the dropout strategy', *New York Times*, 29 July 1973, p. e15; McLuhan, 'McLuhan McLuhan McLuhan', *New York Times*, 10 May 1974, p. 37.

[73]Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding media: the extensions of man* (1964; London, 1967), pp. 330, 352. But see Killen, *1973 nervous breakdown*, pp. 231–2, for Nixon's attempts to practice McLuhan's theories.

[74]McCarthy, *Mask of state*, p. 5.

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engagement with these state actors. What mattered politically, she thought, was the public's ability to act on its deliberative judgement and knowledge. 'If we know, that is, and don't act, can find no frame for action', McCarthy wrote, 'Nixon and his sly firm, *knowing* that *we* know and won't do anything, will have nothing more to fear'.[75] In her view, democratic failure around Watergate would create wider forms of state impunity for the American future.

III

The politics of deception became a major theme in McCarthy's Watergate writings. This emerged after watching testimony from Nixon's senior allies: John Mitchell, director of CRP; John Ehrlichman, domestic policy chief; and H. R. Haldeman, White House chief of staff. All had conspired to cover-up the burglary and resigned before their Senate appearances. All were implicated by the former White House counsel John Dean, whose testimony damaged Nixon deeply.[76] For McCarthy, Dean showed 'no trace of far right ideology' and seemed 'resolved to tell the truth about this particular set of events'.[77] He offered 'touches of awful veracity in his character study of the President and of the paranoid atmosphere surrounding him'.[78] McCarthy analyzed this White House culture through Mitchell, Ehrlichman, and Haldeman.

Mitchell was ominous, McCarthy thought, because his testimony served to bore and distract the public. He dispensed 'a steady dosage of lies', dodged and ignored questions, and claimed to forget key facts.[79] She compared him to a turnip.[80] McCarthy then stressed that Mitchell showed how some forms of dishonesty, while disingenuous and perhaps unwitting, were still morally and politically serious. 'Mitchell brought evil into the Caucus Room', she wrote, 'and this was not unconnected with the boredom he was able to generate.' Through a kind of numbing public banality, Mitchell turned 'spectators who had been constituting a sort of town meeting into a restless, anomic, a-political crowd. After several days of him, nobody cared whether Nixon knew or not, whether Haldeman and Ehrlichman planned the cover-up.'[81] McCarthy saw Mitchell as depoliticizing the public by generating boredom and civic disconnection. She thought his Senate appearance served to alienate and disempower a previously engaged citizenry.

In this sense, McCarthy saw Mitchell as a variation on the 'banality of evil' that Arendt had analyzed in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963). Arendt here argued that totalitarian state actors were often boring and normal people, whose evil was enabled in part by social alienation and depoliticization.[82] McCarthy had engaged closely with *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, defending the book from critics and stressing its relevance

[75]Ibid., p. 33. Emphasis in original.

[76]Kutler, *Wars of Watergate*, pp. 358–62; Graff, *Watergate*, pp. 406–10.

[77]McCarthy, *Mask of state*, pp. 40–1.

[78]Ibid., p. 48.

[79]Ibid., p. 54 (quotation); Kutler, *Wars of Watergate*, pp. 364–5 (testimony).

[80]McCarthy, *Mask of state*, p. 55: 'there was something turnipy about Mitchell, the off-white (or tattletale gray) face with occasional mottlings of purplish pink, the watery, squelchy voice, the smooth bald pate'.

[81]Ibid., p. 62.

[82]Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a report on the banality of evil* (New York, NY, 1963). See also Arendt, *Origins*, p. 323.

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to modern America.[83] When covering Watergate, McCarthy argued that Mitchell was a banal malign bureaucrat whose testimony had the effect of creating public apathy. 'Nor did he seem to be aware', she added, 'of the enormity of what he was enunciating – a doctrine of a higher law transcending the Constitution, incarnate in the figure of our old friend Tricky Dick.' Mitchell struck McCarthy as representing 'a proto-fascist mentality'.[84] Irving Howe also suggested that, 'in a mild sort of way', Nixon's men 'do seem to illustrate Hannah Arendt's notion about "the banality of evil"'.[85] Arendt herself drew parallels with Eichmann when the ex-plumber E. Howard Hunt testified. Watching Hunt claim that he followed orders faithfully, Arendt told McCarthy that he 'acted and looked pretty much like Eichmann – down to details, the same nose and such'.[86]

McCarthy developed a distinctive Arendtian critique of totalitarian depoliticization in the Watergate context. Arguing that 'the relations of the Nixon band among each other' had foreshadowed 'the parallel structures of totalitarian organizations', McCarthy told her readers to 'see Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*' to understand the crisis.[87] For those interested, *Origins* could easily be read for implicit Watergate references. Arendt had seen totalitarian organizations as fusing party and state power to build 'a functioning reality' through lies and propaganda, 'even under nontotalitarian circumstances'.[88] McCarthy saw CRP as an embryonic version of a party-state organization. In a fully realized totalitarian state, Arendt suggested, politicians became impervious to 'that reality which either unmasks the liar or forces him to live up to his pretense'.[89] McCarthy saw precisely this problem in Mitchell and called her book *The mask of state*. Arendt stressed that what mattered in totalitarianism was 'not the truthfulness of the Leader's words but the infallibility of his actions'. To ensure infallibility, 'the entourage of the Leader' engaged in ever more cynical lies and conspiracies, convincing itself 'that even the maddest device has a fair chance of success'.[90] Was this not the Watergate burglary? What else was the cover-up but a functioning reality? Had not the leader's entourage lied and conspired to defend his rule?

Ehrlichman struck McCarthy as similar to Mitchell in his stupidity, dishonesty, and evil.[91] If anything Ehrlichman looked a more fluent liar, and McCarthy imagined his arrest for contempt of Congress.[92] She thought Haldeman seemed better

[83] Mary McCarthy, 'The hue and cry', *Partisan Review*, winter 1964, pp. 82–94, at p. 91. For an introduction to the wider Eichmann debate, see Anson Rabinbach, 'Eichmann in New York: the New York intellectuals and the Hannah Arendt controversy', *October*, 108 (2004), pp. 97–111.

[84] McCarthy, *Mask of state*, p. 66.

[85] Irving Howe, 'Thoughts after Watergate', *Dissent*, fall 1973, pp. 387–91, at p. 390.

[86] Arendt to McCarthy, 30 Sep. 1973, in *Between friends*, pp. 343–4. Arendt was more impressed by Pat Buchanan: 'enormously aggressive, self-assured, smarter than anybody on the Committee'. On Hunt's testimony, see Kutler, *Wars of Watergate*, p. 379.

[87] McCarthy, *Mask of state*, p. 66.

[88] Arendt, *Origins*, p. 364.

[89] Ibid., p. 384.

[90] Ibid., pp. 387–8.

[91] McCarthy, *Mask of state*, pp. 96–7.

[92] Ibid., pp. 98–9.

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than Ehrlichman at first, but eventually he too resembled an Arendtian totalitarian bureaucrat. Haldeman's answers 'showed a grim family resemblance to those of Mitchell and Ehrlichman', McCarthy wrote.[93] For readers of *The Observer* like the literary critic Cyril Connolly, McCarthy's articles made sense of the Watergate maze. 'Anyone can, like me, read all the evidence and watch the telly', he told McCarthy, 'but one still gets lost and fails to evaluate witnesses correctly … you make it all clear.' Connolly had worried that 'you were too partisan, like a Communist at Nuremberg'. But McCarthy convinced him that Watergate exposed an emerging totalitarian state. Connolly wrote that 'these people were the most powerful group in the world & on the threshold of seizing power by stealth from democratic institutions – they were like the Nazis on the eve of the Reichstag fire'.[94]This response suggests that progressive intellectuals were engaged and persuaded by McCarthy's account of Watergate.

How far could her analysis be taken? Rule by ideology and terror, which Arendt saw as central to totalitarianism, was hard to see in the Watergate burglary and cover-up.[95] Nor was the public simply bored into submission by Nixon's men. While McCarthy wrote about deception and depoliticization, many citizens were more straightforwardly angered but unsurprised by the forms of elite corruption that Watergate reconfirmed. Dorothy Stewart had retired from nursing and worked in a hardware store near McCarthy's Maine summer home. 'As a quite ordinary citizen, living in a most limited fashion, but fully aware of the slick conniving opportunists that I distrust instinctively', Stewart told McCarthy, 'this whole affair seems to prove to me that I may not be so far off base.' She followed Watergate from a different class position than McCarthy and Connolly. Watching the Senate hearings 'as background entertainment here in the shop', Stewart was pleased to hear of McCarthy's work because 'I simply felt like registering my reaction to someone'. Stewart's judgement was that, while Dean seemed honest, the others were obvious liars and 'should all be wrapped in the same bundle of "gobble-wash", Mitchell, Ehrlichman and Haldeman. They are making a noble attempt to cleanse themselves and also shield Nixon.'[96]

Dorothy Stewart had not been depoliticized by Mitchell's banal evil. On the contrary her sense of disillusioned spectatorship was clear-eyed, civically engaged, and quietly enraged. She expressed a detached and sceptical opinion, formed by watching television, that was unshocked by Watergate but still opposed to Nixon. Where McCarthy had imagined a mass reading public disempowered by totalitarian bureaucrats, Stewart suggested that self-consciously ordinary citizens were discriminating television viewers. 'Mrs. Average Housewife', as Stewart described herself, 'is accustomed to all sorts of wild situations in these soap operas' and 'has been trained to pick out the good and bad characters'.[97] Unsettled by Stewart's letter, McCarthy told Arendt that it represented 'the great TV public outside', and that for

[93]Ibid., p. 118.

[94]Cyril Connolly to McCarthy, 4 Aug. 1973, MMP 53/8.

[95]Arendt, *Origins*, pp. 460–79.

[96]Dorothy Stewart to McCarthy, 31 July 1973, MMP 53/8. Biographical details from 'Dorothy Stewart: May 22, 1920 – September 26, 2009', *Bangor Daily News*, at https://obituaries.bangordailynews.com/obituary/dorothy-stewart-805250101 [accessed 16 June 2026].

[97]Stewart to McCarthy, 31 July 1973.

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this audience Watergate 'has been entertainment; I don't know how to judge that'.[98] Stewart implied a Watergate public more defined by disenchantment than either deliberation or alienation. This public was an equivocal political formation, grimly entertained and undeceived but without clear means of action.

Arendt worried too about public opinion's ambivalence towards Watergate. As the Senate hearings ran into August, she wrote to McCarthy that 'only 31% (?) support [Nixon] but … no one wants him impeached. In other words, no one really minds about this massive invasion of crime into the political process.' The polls then were indeed anti-impeachment (by 64 per cent) and convinced of Nixon's complicity in Watergate (by 76 per cent). What explained this gap? 'The overwhelming number of scandals which come to light is in a way self-defeating', Arendt suggested. 'Everybody, so it must *seem* did more or less what Nixon did, and where all are guilty no one is.'[99] This echoed the Eichmann debate, when Arendt had argued similarly that 'where all are guilty, no one is'.[100] Both Arendt and McCarthy wanted public deliberation about the political crimes of particular state actors. They rejected as democratically corrosive the claim that Nixon had done nothing special. In their view Watergate demanded a mass civic response.[101]

But the crisis increasingly turned on narrower contests over the White House tapes. When these emerged through Senate investigation, they seemed to confirm aspects of McCarthy's analysis. What could be more symptomatic of Nixon's totalitarian instincts than a personal surveillance system recording his every conversation? 'The model may be found in the Eastern bloc countries', McCarthy wrote. 'Listening-devices installed in offices, hotels, homes, embassies serve no directly profitable purpose but simply go on recording.'[102] As she knew from personal experience in Poland, this kind of surveillance was inhibiting and oppressive. 'The Polish UB [secret police] does not *tell* you that they have installed microphones in your apartment', but the space felt different, and clearly 'at the White House an uneasy feeling got around'.[103] McCarthy suggested that White House staff became so used to bugging each other that 'the desire to extend surveillance to the opposition party would be almost automatic'.[104] Further ironies abounded. The tapes exposed Nixon as totalitarian but could also end his career – in which case, surveillance would have anti-totalitarian effects.

[98]McCarthy to Arendt, 10 Aug. 1973, in *Between friends*, pp. 339–40.

[99]Arendt to McCarthy, 17 Aug. 1973, in *Between friends*, pp. 341–2. Emphasis in original. For polling data, see Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang, *The battle for public opinion: the president, the press, and the polls during Watergate* (New York, NY, 1983), pp. 91, 310. See also King, *Arendt and America*, pp. 293–5.

[100]Hannah Arendt, 'Personal responsibility under dictatorship' (1964), in Arendt, *Responsibility and judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York, NY, 2003), pp. 17–48, at p. 21. McCarthy took a similar view of Medina and invoked Eichmann in *Seventeenth degree*, pp. 404–5.

[101]On this, see Hannah Arendt, 'Home to roost: a bicentennial address', *New York Review of Books*, 26 June 1975, pp. 3–6.

[102]McCarthy, *Mask of state*, p. 101.

[103]Ibid., p. 102. Emphasis in original. McCarthy had stayed in bugged Warsaw rooms with her fourth husband, James West (Brightman, *Writing dangerously*, p. 441).

[104]McCarthy, *Mask of state*, p. 103.

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McCarthy saw the tapes as a lucky technical solution, rather than a real political response, to the democratic crisis of Watergate. Having seen public opinion as politically crucial, she worried that the tapes represented 'an inadvertence of technology. We would no longer have to weigh such "subjective" factors as credibility in making up our minds', McCarthy warned; 'no need for cross-examination, no need, in fact, to hear any more long-winded witnesses'.[105] The tapes lowered the civic stakes of Watergate. They drove legal and technical contests over access, edits, ownership, transcripts. Whole swathes of the crisis devolved into debates about tape doctoring, expert tape witnesses, and what caused tape gaps. The Senate hearings struggled on this shifting terrain. 'For the first time in six weeks', McCarthy reported, 'I heard hisses in the room when Ervin was talking … I turned around and tried to see who was doing it, but the public looked just as usual, intent and impassive.'[106]

McCarthy left Washington in August 1973, less optimistic about the American public and with much unresolved in Watergate. 'Nixon could go totally nuts', her editor Crookston wrote. 'I just hope he can't survive, otherwise 1984 won't be so far away.'[107] Perhaps encouraged by these Orwellian anxieties, McCarthy gave lectures in November on 'Language and politics' that responded to George Orwell's essay 'Politics and the English language' (1946). Orwell had argued that bad prose was partly to blame for political decline, and that 'conscious action of a minority' could and should expose dishonest writing.[108] McCarthy agreed with Orwell that 'cant, jargon, and euphemism' were nascently totalitarian. But she also pointed out that 'exposure (Orwell's remedy)' had proved insufficient. 'How many times has Nixon been exposed as a liar?' What Orwell had missed 'was the element of consent in the public', McCarthy thought. While the tapes might bring Nixon down through 'a delightful turn of technology', McCarthy maintained that 'any real improvement would have to be effected by the popular will'.[109]

IV

Many came to agree with McCarthy that Watergate exposed Nixon's plan for a totalitarian state. Hans Morgenthau argued in *The New Republic* that Nixon had pursued an 'abortive adventure in totalitarianism', and that his allies practiced 'in a haphazard way the same functions' as secret police forces 'in authoritarian and totalitarian societies'.[110] Hunter S. Thompson wrote in *The New York Times* about 'the aggressively totalitarian character of [Nixon's] whole Administration'.[111] Back in Paris, McCarthy remained pessimistic. Watergate's democratic promise seemed much dimmer to her

[105]Ibid., p. 73.

[106]Ibid., p. 121.

[107]Crookston to McCarthy, 8 Aug. 1973, MMP 53/6.

[108]George Orwell, 'Politics and the English language', *Horizon*, Apr. 1946, pp. 252–65, at p. 263. On his centrality to debates about totalitarianism, see Gleason, *Totalitarianism*, pp. 82–4.

[109]Mary McCarthy, 'Language and politics', Nov. 1973, in McCarthy, *Occasional prose* (London, 1985), pp. 83–100, at p. 100. She lectured in Philadelphia and Lawrence, Kansas. For her wider assessment of Orwell, see McCarthy, *The writing on the wall* (London, 1970), pp. 153–71.

[110]Hans J. Morgenthau, 'The aborted Nixon revolution', *New Republic*, 11 Aug. 1973, pp. 17–19, at pp. 18–19.

[111]Hunter S. Thompson, 'Fear and loathing in the bunker', *New York Times*, 1 Jan. 1974, in Thompson, *The great shark hunt: strange tales from a strange time* (1979; New York, NY, 1980), pp. 23–8, at p. 27.

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now. Most of the president's men had lied to Congress. Citizens like Stewart felt more cynical than mobilized. The tapes were a technical distraction from deeper political problems. McCarthy told Arendt that Nixon's ongoing rule 'shows a general inertia and tonelessness of response that's alarming in itself'.[112]

To revive and clarify the politics of Watergate, McCarthy wrote a long essay for the *New York Review of Books* in spring 1974.[113] She argued that, starting with the Huston plan and escalating after the Pentagon Papers, Nixon had embraced a totalitarian agenda.[114] The White House came to resemble 'the Kremlin during the late days of Stalin'. Ehrlichman 'took a leaf from [Soviet secret police chief] Yagoda's book' when extracting confessions from colleagues.[115] Haldeman and Mitchell ordered fanatical deputies like Colson to persecute Nixon's enemies.[116] This led to Magruder and the Watergate break-in. But McCarthy was clear that Watergate in the end 'is a creation of Nixon and of Nixonian politics'.[117] She wrote that, 'unless we say "Nixon", we are forced to conclude that nobody authorized Watergate', and that it 'came to Magruder from a supernatural agency, identified by some with Mitchell, by some with Haldeman, by some with Colson'.[118] Unless Nixon mattered, Watergate made no sense.

McCarthy had outlined a sequence that structured later histories of Watergate: the Huston plan and Pentagon Papers leading a paranoid Nixon to authorize the burglary's cover-up and obstruct justice.[119] But in addition to seeing Nixon as anti-constitutional, McCarthy argued that his aims were overtly totalitarian and that he probably ordered the burglary too. What mattered was 'the *decalage* from the Huston Plan to the Ellsberg episode to Watergate itself', wrote Robert Silvers, her editor at *The New York Review of Books*. He added that, 'if the Watergate business had not been fortuitously discovered, and if Nixon had gone on revamping the FBI, the CIA and the military in his second term, with the now forgotten national consensus behind him, he would have had, I'd think, something resembling real dictatorial power'.[120] For Silvers and *The New York Review of Books*, the politics of Watergate centred on Nixon's totalitarianism. McCarthy pressed this case as the president's support fractured. Senator James Buckley, a conservative New York Republican, called in March 1974 for Nixon's resignation.[121]

How influential were McCarthy's Watergate writings? Her work appeared in highbrow and mainstream outlets, and mattered within and beyond the US intelligentsia. In Britain *The Observer* was a mass-circulation newspaper that sold 775,000 copies every Sunday.[122] Here McCarthy engaged many readers who lacked access to American television. Hazel Hale of west Yorkshire told her that 'the Watergate

[112]McCarthy to Arendt, 1 Mar. 1974, in *Between friends*, pp. 354–6, at p. 355.
[113]Mary McCarthy, 'Watergate', *New York Review of Books*, 4 Apr. 1974, in *Mask of state*, pp. 125–65.
[114]McCarthy, *Mask of state*, pp. 152–7.
[115]Ibid., p. 158.
[116]Ibid., p. 127.
[117]Ibid., p. 161.
[118]Ibid., pp. 140–1. See Kutler, *Wars of Watergate*, p. 209, for a similar if softer view.
[119]E.g. Graff, *Watergate*, pp. xix–xx, xxxiv. See also Lukas, *Nightmare*, pp. 9–11.
[120]Robert Silvers to McCarthy, 1 Mar. 1974, MMP 53/7.
[121]Kutler, *Wars of Watergate*, p. 451.
[122]Richard Cockett, *David Astor and The Observer* (London, 1991), p. 255.

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Hearings have my undivided attention ... I miss the meagre TV coverage we had up to last Thursday – 45 minutes, at the most'.[123] *The New York Review of Books* sold around 85,000 copies per issue, but McCarthy's Watergate pieces also had a broader cultural reach.[124] Readers of *The Boston Globe* learned from the columnist George Frazier that McCarthy was 'lighting up the pages of NYRB with her observations on Watergate'.[125] Listeners to WTFM 103.5, a commercial New York radio station, were told by the broadcaster Quincy Howe to 'beg borrow or steal a copy of the April fourth issue of the N.Y. Review of Books and read Mary McCarthy's piece'.[126]

McCarthy's arguments here framed Watergate for an easy-listening radio audience. WTFM 103.5 was a mainstream 'beautiful music' station with hourly news commentary.[127] Quincy Howe summarized McCarthy's piece in *The New York Review of Books* and contrasted it with James Buckley's call for Nixon to resign honourably. 'As Mary McCarthy tells the story', Howe told his listeners, 'it's hard to see how anybody but President Nixon had the power and the desire to originate and organize the whole Watergate operation from break-in through cover-up ... McCarthy's interpretation of Watergate runs counter to Senator Buckley's ... What a contrast to the Buckley appeal for a Nixon resignation.'[128] McCarthy sharpened the stakes of Watergate on commercial radio as well as in newspapers and magazines.

When *The mask of state* was published in book form in June 1974, it was a solid critical success. Richard Goodwin reviewed it positively for *The New York Times*.[129] A rave by McCarthy's friend Harold Rosenberg appeared in *The New York Review of Books*, rebutting a negative piece by James Fallows in *Washington Monthly*.[130] McCarthy's book was also reviewed beyond New York and Washington. Victor Hass, veteran book critic at *The Omaha World-Herald* in Nebraska, thought *The mask of state* contained 'some of the most interesting pieces to come out of the Watergate horror'. Quoting her extensively, Hass stressed that 'McCarthy is no mincer of words' and was 'lethal' with Nixon.[131] Her book sold nearly half the first printing of 10,000 copies before publication.[132] It was a 'Bookseller's Choice' in the national chain Doubleday stores.[133] French and Spanish translations of *The mask of state* appeared in 1974, followed by a US paperback in 1975.[134]

[123]Hazel Hale to McCarthy, 7 Aug. 1973, MMP 53/8.

[124]Philip Nobile, *Intellectual skywriting: literary politics and The New York Review of Books* (New York, NY, 1974), p. 65.

[125]George Frazier, 'The lit'ry life', *Boston Globe*, 6 Apr. 1974, clipping in MMP 53/9.

[126]Quincy Howe, 'Nixon's the one', 25–26 Mar. 1974, broadcast copy in MMP 53/9.

[127]On its context, see Christopher H. Sterling and Michael C. Keith, *Sounds of change: a history of FM broadcasting in America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2008), pp. 111, 136–9.

[128]Howe, 'Nixon's the one'.

[129]Richard Goodwin, 'Watergate observed', *New York Times Book Review*, 30 June 1974, pp. 5–6.

[130]Harold Rosenberg, 'Up against the news', *New York Review of Books*, 31 Oct. 1974, pp. 16–18; James Fallows, 'Mary McCarthy – the blinders she wears', *Washington Monthly*, May 1974, pp. 5–17. On McCarthy's friendship with Rosenberg, see Brightman, *Writing dangerously*, pp. 428–9.

[131]Victor P. Hass, '"New journalist" unmasks character of Watergate', *Omaha World-Herald*, 29 May 1974, clipping in MMP 53/9.

[132]William Jovanovich to McCarthy, 6 June 1974, MMP 108/2.

[133]Doubleday, 'Best seller guide', *New York Times*, 11 July 1974, p. 12.

[134]Mary McCarthy, *Watergate: la tragédie de l'Amérique,* trans. Angélique Lévi (Paris, 1974); McCarthy, *Retratos de Watergate*, trans. Antonio J. Desmonts (Barcelona, 1974).

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But the book's commercial success was curtailed by the simultaneous appearance of *All the president's men*. Woodward and Bernstein wrote a well-timed blockbuster that narrated their reporting in hardboiled prose. Their book sold hundreds of thousands of copies and landed perfectly in a literary market that rewarded crime and spy fiction.[135] Published as the House judiciary committee began impeachment proceedings, *All the president's men* functioned as a civic primer on Watergate's key moments and characters.[136] The book's 1976 movie adaptation further enhanced its cultural power. Without imposing an overarching framework on the crisis beyond its narrative suspense and journalistic heroism, Woodward and Bernstein offered a tighter introduction to Watergate than McCarthy's more speculative and theoretical analysis. This came through in joint reviews of their books. One reviewer wrote that 'at this Point in Time' Americans needed to know the basic facts about Watergate, and that Woodward and Bernstein were better than McCarthy for this purpose.[137] 'To Bernstein and Woodward go the credit for uncovering the most pervasive corruption of our times', wrote another reviewer, 'but the reader seeking insight into the nature of that corruption will gain more from Mary McCarthy's collection'.[138]

By summer 1974, the end seemed nigh for Nixon. McCarthy had warned against his totalitarian aims, but Watergate went on for two years without jackboots actually in the streets. The House impeachment hearings suggested a system working, and were lauded this way in Jimmy Breslin's *How the good guys finally won* (1975).[139] Publication of partial tape transcripts further reduced the salience of McCarthy's totalitarian analysis. For instead of a coherent police state, the transcripts revealed a great deal of recursive drift.[140] McCarthy wrote that White House staff talked 'like Murder Incorporated', but they also seemed blundering and schlocky – more banality than evil.[141] A series of court rulings and congressional hearings eventually forced the publication of previously withheld tape transcripts. These proved that Nixon knew about the cover-up barely a week after the burglary, and that he personally obstructed justice in a criminal investigation.[142] Having lost enough Republican support to prevent impeachment, Nixon resigned in August.

Frameworks of tragedy became prominent ways to understand Watergate just after Nixon's resignation. Pardoning the former president for all crimes committed in office, Gerald Ford said that Nixon's fate was 'an American tragedy'.[143] Theodore White theorized Watergate as a tragedy in *Breach of faith: the fall of Richard Nixon* (1975). White argued that Nixon's character was his fate, that 'his character

[135]Woodward and Bernstein, *All the president's men*, passim. Schudson, *Watergate*, p. 112, reports sales near 300,000; Graff, *Watergate*, p. 611, suggests slightly lower figures. Another bestseller at this time was John le Carré, *Tinker tailor solider spy* (New York, NY, 1974).

[136]Kutler, *Wars of Watergate*, p. 459.

[137]Clifford A. Ridley, 'Two Watergate books: facts first', *National Observer*, 8 June 1974, clipping in MMP 53/9.

[138]Peter Jenkins, 'Woodstein's story', *Guardian*, 27 June 1974, p. 9.

[139]Jimmy Breslin, *How the good guys finally won: notes from an impeachment summer* (New York, NY, 1975).

[140]Graff, *Watergate*, pp. 595–6.

[141]McCarthy, *Mask of state*, p. 174.

[142]Kutler, *Wars of Watergate*, pp. 534–5.

[143]Gerald Ford, 'Remarks on signing a proclamation granting pardon to Richard Nixon', 8 Sep. 1974, at www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/256490 [accessed 16 June 2026].

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was flawed', and that hubris led to nemesis in Watergate.[144] But Woodward and Bernstein's second book, *The final days* (1976), took furthest the view of Nixon as a tragic figure. Watergate here was a tear-jerker. Nixon wept in Kissinger's arms 'curled on the carpet like a child'. When he left the White House Nixon's staff were 'sad, torn, in tears', Woodward and Bernstein wrote. 'They had lost their place in the sun because of what one man had done.'[145] From this angle, Watergate's tragedy reflected Nixon's character and personal actions instead of any wider project for the American state.

McCarthy rejected the view that Watergate was a tragedy. 'What tragedy?', she asked. The burglary and cover-up were for her a criminal conspiracy to subvert democracy and build a totalitarian regime. Watergate 'had a happy ending', McCarthy stressed, in the sense that 'Nixon went, and all his court with him'. While his pardon was outrageous, many allies went to jail. The real tragedy of Watergate, McCarthy thought, lay in how Nixon represented democratic as well as totalitarian forces. His career was a political fact that 'we have all played a part in', she wrote. 'We voted for him, opposed him, cheered him, abused him, marched against him, strewed flowers in his path.'[146] Nixon's fraught popularity, not his personality, made Watergate partially tragic. His ability to express real public sentiments, as well as manipulate opinion, made him politically significant and remained bracingly resonant.

Thus McCarthy saw Watergate as a kind of mirror for democracy. She thought its deepest meaning lay not in Nixon's personal tragedy but in the very process of political revelation. What ultimately mattered in Watergate was the uncanny part 'that persists in disclosing itself, despite all efforts, well-meaning or evilly designed. Pardon will not quieten Nixon', McCarthy concluded; 'nor in the long run will it defraud the public, if getting hold of the facts, the actual *corpus delicti*, rather than of Nixon's flailing, struggling person is its real desire'.[147] Watergate reflected the public back to itself in ways that were troubling, potentially empowering, and most of all revealing. If the public wanted to oppose Nixon's state project, it would gain much from Watergate. But if the public looked away from the Watergate mirror, if the main issue was Nixon's character, or if the crisis became a legal and technical matter, then its core political lessons would be lost. Watergate showed McCarthy how and why the relationship between public opinion and state power could run in both democratic and totalitarian directions.

This edge to McCarthy's argument was caught best in the underground press.[148] While circulations here were small, radical counterpublics thrived. Reviewing *The mask of state* for the Boston weekly *Gay Community News*, Gary Indiana argued for a broader popular front against Nixonian proto-fascism. 'A political alliance of the Gay

[144]Theodore H. White, *Breach of faith: the fall of Richard Nixon* (1975; New York, NY, 1986), p. 50.

[145]Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, *The final days* (1976; New York, NY, 1997), pp. 423, 456.

[146]McCarthy, *Mask of state*, p. 178. For her initial response to the pardon, see McCarthy to Arendt, 9 Sep. 1974, in *Between friends*, pp. 363–4.

[147]McCarthy, *Mask of state*, p. 183.

[148]This paragraph draws on Benjamin Serby, '"Not to produce newspapers, but committed radicals": the underground press, the new left, and the gay liberation counterpublic in the United States, 1965–1976', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 32 (2023), pp. 1–26, at pp. 2–3, 24–5.

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Liberation Movement with the ideologies of other oppressed groups could be a real threat', he wrote, specifying 'poor blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans and others whose spokespersons have been casually murdered by the government'. For marginalized citizens facing state violence, Indiana framed left political unity as an urgent practical necessity. Where McCarthy had celebrated and criticized the American public at large, Indiana thought her analysis called for a more focused and militant coalition. Nixon and Ford might be followed by 'something far more unhinged, but much more tightly organized', Indiana warned. It was 'not the hour for those of us with everything to lose by a fascist conquest of America to "wait and see"'.[149]

After Watergate a more bellicose and better organized conservative movement became dominant in American politics. Congress investigated domestic surveillance and disclosed more abuses, but did not seriously alter the structure or power of executive intelligence agencies.[150] Ronald Reagan, for whom Watergate was 'not criminal, just illegal', won the 1980 election and became a broadly popular president.[151] He reauthorized FBI and CIA programs that spied on US citizens. 'Really, was it worth it to throw Nixon out?', McCarthy asked in 1982. Watergate had seemed to vindicate 'the framework of our republic', because citizens saw 'the judiciary and the legislative branches of government rounding on the monstrous, trespassing executive'. But now the state was ruled by Reagan and what McCarthy saw as 'Far Right' forces. Searching for their origins, she emphasized 'the trail leading out of Watergate blazed by Chuck Colson. It is a chilling thought that he, from his jail cell, understood the message of Watergate better than we fond libertarians.'[152] In despair at politics and feuding with Lillian Hellman, McCarthy focused on writing obituaries and memoir in her later years.[153] She died at seventy-seven in 1989.

McCarthy thought about Watergate through complex interactions between an emerging totalitarian state and the wider American public. Framing the burglary and cover-up not as a detective story but as a deep crisis of democratic legitimacy, she argued that Watergate initially produced a rational mass public in direct opposition to Nixon. But she also worried that bureaucrats like Mitchell worked to build public apathy and entrench American totalitarianism. As the crisis continued, McCarthy explained the ambiguities of Watergate by emphasizing the equivocal and contingent nature of public opinion. She stressed the public's capacity to support both democratic and anti-democratic state forms. In this sense, Watergate was a mirror that revealed what the public really wanted from the state. For McCarthy, the crisis exposed how and whether American democracy could unmask and defeat the power of liars, criminals, and worse.

[149]Gary Jane Hoisington [Gary Indiana], 'The pleasure of her company', *Gay Community News*, 15 June 1974, p. 8.

[150]Kathryn S. Olmsted, *Challenging secret government: the post-Watergate investigations of the CIA and FBI* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1996), pp. 5–7, 169–89; Dafydd Townley, *The year of intelligence in the United States: public opinion, national security, and the 1975 Church committee* (New York, NY, 2021), pp. 307–11.

[151]Quotation from Rick Perlstein, *The invisible bridge: the fall of Nixon and the rise of Reagan* (New York, NY, 2014), p. 100.

[152]Mary McCarthy, 'Watergate over the dam', *New York Review of Books*, 15 July 1982, p. 44.

[153]McCarthy, *Occasional prose*, pp. 3–44; McCarthy, *How I grew* (New York, NY, 1987). On the Hellman feud, see Brightman, *Writing dangerously*, pp. 597–622; Alan Ackerman, *Just words: Lillian Hellman, Mary McCarthy, and the failure of public conversation in America* (New Haven, CT, 2011).

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