

Seeing so much of the present through Watergate makes it harder to see the future



By J. Peter Scoblic October 6 at 12:44 PM

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How can we reconcile the conviction that Donald Trump’s presidency is a singular abomination with the sense that we’ve seen all this play out before?

For months, countless commentaries have warned us — or, depending on your perspective, reassured us — that this administration may be heading toward the same conclusion as Richard Nixon’s. In May, after the firing of FBI Director James Comey, Nixon chronicler [Elizabeth Drew wrote](#) in Politico: “While Watergate was *sui generis* and is likely to remain so, Trump’s metastasizing crisis, and Washington’s reaction to it, make for a discomfiting reminder of that period. And suddenly it seems increasingly possible it could end the same way.” A few weeks later, New York magazine’s [Frank Rich wrote](#) that there is “reason to hope that the 45th president’s path through scandal may wind up at the same destination as the 37th’s — a premature exit from the White House in disgrace — on a comparable timeline.”

That comparison has persisted, or even deepened, as Robert Mueller’s investigation has expanded. Noah Feldman and Jacob Weisberg began an [essay](#) last month in the New York Review of Books by arguing, “As more and more evidence of collusion between Donald Trump’s presidential campaign and Russia has come to light, the analogy to Watergate has grown ever stronger.”

There are strengths and weaknesses to the Watergate comparison, but our fascination with it is, perhaps more than anything, a product of our visceral discomfort with uncertainty. At the mercy of a president whose stock in trade is unpredictability, and amid a presidency that has provided more surprises than most, Americans crave foresight. We want to know how this story ends. Analogy provides a seductive answer, cloaking the cold ambiguity of the future in the blanket of the past: If today looks like yesterday, we reason, our tomorrow will look like yesterday’s tomorrow.

But relying so heavily on this heuristic may actually make it more difficult to anticipate what's coming. Analogy encourages us to see the past as static, when it was in fact a dynamic collection of possible futures that just happened to gel into the present we know. That mistake blinds us to our own potential futures — and what we might learn from them. In trying to reduce uncertainty, we may have ensured that Trump will surprise us even more than he already has.

We take our experience of time for granted. Scholars Allen Bluehorn and Robert Denhardt put it this way: “As a society, we tend to agree on an objective concept of time, one that is unitary (subject to only one interpretation), linear (progressing steadily forward from past to present to future), and mechanical (containing discrete moments subject to precise measurement).”

This common view of time is comforting — it provides a sense of order — but it serves us poorly in thinking about history. Seeing the present as a function of the past, and the future as a function of the present, suppresses the fact that events need not have happened the way they did.

Obviously, history cannot be changed, but as it unfolded, the past — like our present — was a froth of potential futures. In considering analogy, then, we must ask not only whether what happened before looks like what is happening now, but also whether what might have happened before looks like what might happen now. To be truly useful, an analogy must be precise not only in its actualities but in its potentialities.

The Watergate scandal had many potential outcomes, and Nixon's resignation may have been one of the least likely.

Tim Naftali, who served as director of the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, has written, “Had it not been for four independent developments, Nixon's cover up might well have held.” First, John Sirica, the judge in the Watergate burglary trial, pried the truth from the dissembling defendants with the threat of heavy sentences. Second, The Washington Post's reporting sparked a congressional investigation. Third, Attorney General Elliot Richardson followed up on his promise to Senate Democrats to appoint an independent prosecutor. Finally, and perhaps most important, Nixon chose not to destroy the tapes of his White House conversations — even after he learned that their existence was going to be made public.

A single death may have been a fifth prerequisite for Nixon's resignation. Journalist Tim Weiner has written about the pivotal role that Nixon's close friendship with FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover might have played: “One of history's great what-ifs is whether the Watergate investigation would have gone forward if Hoover hadn't died six weeks before the break-in.”

If we grasp that history was full of possibilities, we improve our chances of learning from it. In fact, as psychologist Philip Tetlock and political scientist Aaron Belkin have written, we cannot learn from history unless we imagine alternative past futures — better known as counterfactuals — because they allow us to identify what caused what. We can know whether an event mattered only if we ask what the world would have looked like if it hadn't happened.

Acknowledging such historical possibilities also opens us up to learning from the future. On its face, that idea may seem nonsensical. After all, the future hasn't happened yet, and generally we think of learning as a function of experience. Our

mental models of how the world works are based on — and constantly being updated by — the cause-and-effect relationships we observe. Yet we use those models, based on the past, to plan ahead; we act in the present to bring about an expected future.

Psychologist Endel Tulving dubbed this “mental time travel,” and its implications are profound. Our expectations of the future are central to the concept of choice — they are what give people agency. If we couldn’t imagine alternative futures and choose among them, the intentional would be merely the instinctual. Our humanity is a function of our ability to look to the future and act on it.

But when we do that, the future looks back and acts on us — that is, we learn from it.

We can envision different versions of the future and work backward to discover what conditions would produce them. In that process, we forge new beliefs about causal relationships, new mental models. Imagination, in other words, can have an effect similar to experience. Historical counterfactuals and possible futures are flip sides of the same what-if coin.

This similarity between past- and future-thinking has support in the physical and social sciences. Neuroscientists have found that the brain uses similar processes to remember the past and to envision the future. One study showed that people who suffered memory loss following damage to the hippocampus also had difficulty imagining detailed futures. Sociologist Karl Weick argues that we can make sense of the future only if we envision it as having already happened — that we think in the future perfect. And, using computer simulations, organizational theorists Giovanni Gavetti and Daniel Levinthal have demonstrated that, in uncertain environments, “cognitive search” (imagining the future) can be more adaptive than “experiential search” (revisiting the past).

Challenging mental models by thinking about the future is common practice in business and the military, because it provides a defense against surprise.

Consider the use of scenario planning, which originated in the early 1960s with Herman Kahn, a defense analyst notorious for his willingness to “think the unthinkable” about nuclear war. Kahn used stories to imagine how the Soviets or other enemies might employ the bomb. “We draw scenarios and try to cope with history before it happens,” he once explained.

Kahn, in turn, influenced Pierre Wack, a Royal Dutch Shell executive who feared that the Western-dominated oil industry was about to collapse in the face of Arab nationalism. His colleagues dismissed the idea, so Wack developed a method to challenge their assumptions by generating “coherent and credible alternative stories about the future,” as Shell’s chief economist has written. In doing so, Wack changed Shell’s mental model of the world, and the company was prepared for the price shock that hit in 1973.

A similar process is at work in war games, artificial case studies that are particularly helpful in complex situations in which past experience does not provide sufficient guidance. The goal of these games is to help players anticipate a broader range of possibilities — or, even better, to instill a mental plasticity that enables them to respond to the unexpected, according to Pete Pellegrino, a war game designer with Cubic Global Defense currently at the U.S. Naval War College.

Fleet Adm. Chester Nimitz, who commanded the Pacific naval forces during World War II, maintained that because of the extensive gaming he had done as a student at the Naval War College, nothing Japan did surprised him. By that he did not mean, Pellegrino says, that the games predicted what ultimately happened — his school gamed plenty of unlikely scenarios, including a showdown with Germany in the Caribbean. But those exercises cultivated an intellectual flexibility that allowed Nimitz to quickly adapt to new situations.

That, then, is how we may learn from the future — and it is why historians Richard Neustadt and Ernest May have urged analogists to see “time as a stream,” in which the future is constantly on the verge of becoming the past. Amid the chaos of the present, they wrote in their book “Thinking in Time,” we must pause “to ponder possible futures.” We must push our “imaginative foresight to the limit” and constantly ask what is new about the present. “The future may surprise. It surprises because something in the present, hard to see, weakens the past as a guide.”

A danger of fixating on the Watergate analogy — on any analogy — is that it sets us in a rut. Watergate has become the model for how American politics works when criminality is suspected, and it may be blinding us to other possibilities. The Mueller investigation might last far longer than Trump’s critics hope. Its findings might not implicate the president directly — as former acting attorney general Sally Yates and former Manhattan U.S. attorney Preet Bharara emphasized this past week, there’s a high bar for proving criminal conduct. And there is the question of whether the Republican Congress would ever consider articles of impeachment.

What’s more, recent events suggest that we are not mentally flexible enough to imagine what Trump will do next. Did the Watergate analogy prepare us for a president who demands the political loyalty of the service members he commands and holds rallies blaming the media for “trying to take away our history and our heritage”? Did the Watergate analogy prepare us for the racism of Charlottesville and the president’s sympathy for its perpetrators? Did the Watergate analogy prepare us for a president whose idea of strategy is to repeatedly taunt a dictator newly capable of striking the United States with nuclear weapons?

Certainly there are parallels to Watergate in the investigations into Trump’s potential collusion with Russia and his response to them. But those parallels can’t answer the most important question: How does this end? They can’t prepare us for a president who would be unlikely to leave office peacefully, as Nixon did, but who instead might appeal to the racist, populist and authoritarian impulses that propelled him to office.

Perhaps the essential lesson of Watergate is that the union could survive the corruption of its most powerful figure while key institutions emerged stronger. Told this way, the story is a happy one. But it need not have been. As historian Douglas Brinkley, who co-edited two volumes of the Nixon tapes, put it to me: “When we talk about Watergate, we latch on to the fact that U.S. checks and balances endured. However things shake out, our institutions persevere. But what if they don’t persevere?”

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