

## Reflections of the Class of 1976

By Ilene Kent

Looking back 35 years to identify just one news story that impacted who we, The Franklin and Marshall Class of 1976 became later in life, was both challenging daunting. We headed out into the real world the very year that our nation celebrated its 200th birthday.

We had the privilege of attending a small liberal arts college at a time when many others our age were halfway around the world fighting a war of which few at home approved. Our class was the last of many where the boys had to register for the selective service, and then received a lottery number indicating their chances of being conscripted in the US military. Was this the event? Maybe.

Was it the iconic “they’re all gone” from ABC Sports Newscaster Jim McKay in reference to the Israeli athletes murdered in Munich as many of us were making the long trek from home to Lancaster for the first day of our amazing four-year journey. The tragedy played out on the world stage has had repercussions to this day. Maybe this is it.

Then of course there was the “free love” movement – or so I heard . . . I was a coed at a school that until just a few years earlier was all men! Woohoo! Women were being given opportunities that prior generations could only dream of. Men still outnumbered women by a ratio about 3:2 and Planned Parenthood was quite the place to see and be seen – or not. I can remember a particularly embarrassing visit where I was spotted by one of the Lambda Chi boys who swore up and down he wouldn’t “spill the beans.” Well, I’m not sure I need to tell you how that worked out. And then, just a year after we arrived in Lancaster, the Supreme Court, in an historic and controversial ruling even today 35 years later, decided that a right to privacy under the due process clause in the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution extends to a woman's decision to have an abortion. But was this THE defining moment at school? Not so fast.

There was another event that enveloped the nation, changed how we viewed the Presidency, fueled the role of the media in politics, and became synonymous with government abuse of power.

I could be wrong but I’m guessing that none of us, as we were enjoying our post-high school and pre-college days doing whatever it was we were doing in the Summer of 1972, could understand or know just how this would define our generation in a way that few other events would. I, for one, was certainly not aware of much outside my own zip code, and maybe my area code.

In June of 1972, an astute security guard discovered a break-in at the Democratic National Headquarters situated in an upscale apartment/office complex . . . and the Watergate Era began. Later that year, many of us voted in our first-ever presidential election, and saw George McGovern lose in one of the most lopsided victories in US history so frankly, I’m not quite sure what the White House at that time was so concerned about, but I digress.

By the spring of 1973, seven of the criminals who were caught or implicated in the actual burglary at the Watergate were found or pled guilty and sentenced to prison, the US Senate had created the Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities, President Nixon had announced that White House staff would appear at those hearings, the White House denied the President had prior knowledge of the Watergate affair, and key White House staffers HR Haldeman, John Ehrlichman, and Jon Dean resigned – a very busy time in our Nation’s Capital, indeed.

The Watergate hearings were held over the summer of 1973 and made for riveting television. Something so commonplace today that CSPAN is an insomniac’s dream was, at the time, revolutionary. Networks carried the daytime hearings from the day they began on May 18 until the final gavel nearly 3 months later. In October of that year, probably as many of us were celebrating an F&M football win, the Attorney General (Elliott Richardson) refuses the President’s direct order to fire the Watergate Special Prosecutor (Archibald Cox), and resigns in protest. An acting Attorney General – Robert Bork – a man who would later be thrust onto the national stage by being nominated – and rejected for -- the US Supreme Court fires Cox in what has come to be known as the “Saturday Night Massacre.” Investigations into the “Nixon Tapes” continued until mid-year 1974 when the House Judiciary Committee agreed to charge the President with obstruction of investigation with regards to the Watergate break-in, misuse of powers and violation of his oath of office, and failure to comply with House Subpoenas.

Finally, over two years after a seemingly routine break-in, the country’s long national nightmare, known as Watergate, had come and gone. The intrepid investigative duo of Woodward and Bernstein contributed significantly to the downfall of the “I am not a Crook President,” and in August 1974, the President of the United States, rather than face imminent impeachment, resigned. The nation was left to wonder for years whether “Deep Throat,” the anonymous source documented by Woodward and Bernstein in the best seller, *All the President’s Men*,” and later in the movie of the same name, existed at all. This shameful event in our country’s history brought out the best of America and the worst of America. But at the end of the day, this scandal showed that, and no one, not even the President of the United States, was above the law (notwithstanding, of course, President Ford’s pardon of Nixon just a month later).

President Reagan years later adopted and made famous a phrase “Trust but verify.” Prior to Watergate and the Vietnam War, I’d say that many of our generation trusted, but without verifying. We came of age at a time where you listened to and respected authority pretty much without question. But what this scandalous period showed us is the importance of separation of powers as provided in the United States Constitution. It also brought about a sea change in how we viewed our government, with a healthy dose of skepticism. It’s important for us as Americans to be involved, to ask questions and not just go along with the status quo. It would not be a stretch to say that many of us from the Class of 76 have made family, career, and other life choices based on the lessons of the Watergate era. And we know that journalism has never been the same – think of how often we stop and ask ourselves “where is the next Woodward and Bernstein?”

## **Class of 1976 Reflection Poem by Ilene Kent**

It happened in June of '72  
An open door at the Watergate, was found askew  
The guard saw some men who shouldn't be there  
And what followed thereafter was the Watergate Affair.

George McGovern did lose that November  
By a landslide that all were sure to remember.  
In hindsight of course, we surely must ask  
What were you thinking, you silly jack ass!

As freshmen in college we could not fully take in  
How important it was this silly break in.  
Missing tapes and all we would hear about for years  
And for many it meant all new careers.

Woodward and Bernstein, "Investigators R Us"  
They believed in liberty and "In God We Trust"  
With Deep Throat they met to discuss what had happened  
And at the end of it all 'twas the President Nixon was deeply chagrined.

Resign, Nixon did, to no one's surprise,  
After one Saturday Night, with his Massacre so ill-advised.  
Agnew the VP had chosen to resign, so new President Ford  
Said, Dickie, here's your pardon.

To those of us in 76 we had enough of Dick and his Dirty Tricks  
We learned that to question authority is good  
But most of all we learned that if ever we wonder  
It's important to question before the country goes under.

### **Headlines in . . .**

1972

- Watergate Break In
- Munich Massacre: while there are many evil events throughout history, the Massacre of Israeli Olympians in 1972 extremely shocked the World and dramatically changed World events

1973

- US Supreme Court legalizes abortion in Roe v. Wade
- Vietnam War ends
- American Indian movement occupy Wounded Knee, SD to dramatize group demands

1974

- Richard Nixon resigns as president
- Nixon is granted full pardon by President Gerald Ford
- Patty Hearst is kidnapped by Symbionese Liberation Army terrorists

1975

- Last American forces leave Vietnam and Saigon falls to the communists
- President Ford is targeted for assassination twice

1976

- Jimmy Carter elected President
- US celebrates its Bicentennial
- Viking I lands on Mars
- Legionnaire's disease strikes convention in Philadelphia