PROGRESSIVE ILLUSIONS 04.10.2018 | Tobias Fella

That's not the new Watergate

Despite a scandal-ridden US administration, it's an illusion to think Donald Trump will be gone any time soon

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Trump is in trouble. The new book by Watergate journalist Bob Woodward and an article by an anonymous White House official paint an alarming picture of the Trump presidency. Secretary of Defence James Mattis is quoted as saying that the president 'acted like – and had the understanding of – a 'fifth or sixth grader'. Trump is described as impulsive and as showing no interest in the strategic consequences of his policies. His chief of staff John Kelly called the White House 'crazytown' – a place where all reason and logic have gone out the window. Some officials believe they have no option but to resist from the inside. That way, as one of them explained in *The New York Times*, they can at least prevent the biggest disasters.

But that's not even the whole situation. The Democrats are expected to win a landslide in the midterms in November. The Russia inquiry is hanging over the Oval Office like the sword of Damocles. If FBI special counsel Robert Mueller can find proof that Trump and his campaign conspired with the Kremlin during the 2016 elections, the chants of 'lock her up' will be replaced by calls to 'lock him up'. Trump's only hope then would be a pardon from Mike Pence, who would take over if Trump resigns or is successfully impeached.

Many are comparing the situation to the Watergate scandal. On 8 August 1974, Richard Nixon became the first US president to resign (pre-empting attempts to impeach him), after an investigation exposed corruption and illegal activities in the White House. It was the culmination of a chain of events set in motion two years earlier when members of Nixon's campaign team organised a break-in at the Democratic Party's headquarters in the Watergate complex in Washington D.C. The investigation begun by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein unearthed so much evidence that in the end even leading Republicans in Congress had no choice but to abandon their support for

Nixon.

However, such a scenario is unlikely to be repeated in Trump's case.

Five reasons why Trump will stay

Firstly, the Republican Party is no longer what it was in the 1970s. Back then, the party was dominated by long-established politicians like Barry Goldwater, who believed in the institutional independence of Congress. Nowadays, by contrast, Republican members of the Senate and House of Representatives see themselves as extensions of the president. One striking example is Devin Nunes, chair of the Select Committee on Intelligence, who never misses a chance to question the legitimacy of the Russia probe.

Secondly, Trump enjoys media support the likes of which Nixon could never have dreamed of. Fox News acts as the mouthpiece of the president, and Sean Hannity, who hosts a talk show on the channel, is his close friend and unofficial advisor. There's also an array of right-wing blogs, websites and social media accounts lined up to spring to the president's defence at a moment's notice. Counternarratives are presented immediately and in real time, attacks are met with counterattacks. It's almost impossible for any alternative points of view to get through to conservatives. Most Republican voters regard Fox News and Trump as far more reliable sources of information than CNN or MSNBC.

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In Nixon's day, the media landscape was less fragmented. Only three big networks and PBS broadcast nationwide, while the national newspaper market was dominated by just a handful of titles. The reputation of the 'fourth estate' was largely untarnished, and there were still figures like CBS anchor Walter Cronkite, 'the most trusted man in America'. On his show, Nixon's supporters had to defend their president. Trump's followers, by contrast, have Hannity and Fox News, where their idol never comes under any attack.

Thirdly, the country today is divided differently than it was in 1974. Although the US of the 1970s was shaken to its foundations by the Vietnam War, Watergate, racism and student protests, there was still a common ground of generally agreed truths within whose bounds political debate could take place. Since Trump was elected, this consensus has broken down. There is now almost no contact between the two sides'

versions of reality. Just as conservatives are convinced of their president's innocence in the Russia affair, liberals are certain of his guilt – quite independently of what the current state of the investigation is.

Fourthly, Trump has become president in an era when <link schwerpunkt-des-monats us-zwischenwahlen artikel detail the-big-wahlkampfspender-2954>the political system is broken. For years, political parties have been manipulating voting district boundaries in their own favour. There has been a rapid growth in the influence of money on politics (for example, through campaign donations), undermining democratic legitimacy and breeding frustrations that have hindered efforts to build bipartisan opposition. Under Nixon's presidency, the rot was only just beginning to set in. The checks and balances were more robust than today, the trust in politics greater.

The fifth factor is Trump himself. Following the ruling of the Supreme Court, Nixon turned over incriminating tape recordings to the authorities. It is hard to imagine his present-day successor doing the same, despite the constitutional crisis that would result if Trump refuses to hand over potential evidence. It also seems unlikely that Trump will be removed from power by means of the 25th Amendment, which allows the vice-president, with the support of the cabinet, to declare the president unfit for office. The party is too dependent on Trump and his voters to go down that route.

So what will happen?

A defeat for the Republicans in the midterms in November will probably escalate the situation still further. The Democrats will pile even more pressure on the White House, for instance by initiating impeachment proceedings or setting up new investigative committees, which will summon headline-grabbing witnesses to give testimony. The president, with Fox and InfoWars in his corner, will put up stiff resistance. The precedent established in recent years has made any other alternative impossible. Obstruction and polemics have become the order of the day – on both sides of the political spectrum.

It's easy for us Europeans to regard the situation in the US as bizarre and baffling, utterly unlike anything that could happen this side of the Atlantic. But we shouldn't fall into the mistake of self-righteously seeing ourselves as the last bastion of the liberal world order. Because we're not: we've created too many problems, both at home and abroad, for that to be the case. If there is a way out of this predicament, it will involve us showing more humility, not less – including in our claims to truth. We have the intellectual tools to do so at our disposal, especially in the work

of Michel Foucault and Chantal Mouffe. Now, if we wish to build a social Europe, we need to actually make use of them.

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Tobias Fella
Berlin

Dr Tobias Fella heads the trilateral Challenges to Deep Cuts project at the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg (IFSH). Previously, he was a policy adviser for European foreign, security and defense policy at the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), a fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) and a project coordinator and research associate at the Hertie School.

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