

How George H.W. Bush endured Watergate

Just after Richard Nixon won reelection in 1972, he asked his ambassador to the United Nations to become chairman of the Republican National Committee.

The ambassador, George Herbert Walker Bush, didn't really want to change jobs but said, "I always felt that one should do what the president asked of him unless he was certain he could not do the job."

Little did Bush know what he was in for.

Within months, the Watergate investigation began and Bush found himself trying to lead a party whose president was sinking in a morass of his own making.

Bush had to:

- **Distinguish among the players.** He wanted to accentuate Nixon's accomplishments, but stressed, "You want to be darn sure that the people know the party does not approve of Watergate or its handling."
- **Fend off zealots.** When White House Chief of Staff Alexander Haig pressured Bush to endorse documents — sight unseen — being prepared for an "all-out offensive" on behalf of the president, Bush refused.

"In my opinion," Bush said, "the president was entitled to advocacy and that, if in good conscience I couldn't support what it was that he was talking about, then I would resign."

- **Preserve independence.** In a letter to his sons (Bush says he thought his daughter was too young), Bush told them to listen to their consciences.

"Don't be afraid not to join the mob," he wrote, "if you feel inside it's wrong. Don't confuse being 'soft' with seeing the other guy's point of view. Understand, too, that the power accompanied by arrogance is very dangerous. It's particularly dangerous when men with no real experience have it, for they can abuse our great institutions."

Lesson: Although Nixon's men faulted Bush for not making Watergate a partisan issue, Bush ultimately protected the Republican Party from lasting damage.

—Adapted from *My Father, My President*, Doro Bush Koch, Warner Books.