

Avigail: Hi, I'm Avigail Oren, and I'm one of your hosts for Scholars Strategy Network's No Jargon. In our last episode, we explored President Trump's efforts to dismantle certain federal agencies and the striking parallels to President Nixon's attempt to shut down the Office of Economic opportunity, along with the legal and political pushback that followed.

Our guest, political scientist Ryan LaRoche walked us through that history. Today, we're diving even deeper. In this bonus content, Ryan shares what he uncovered about William S. Cohen, a Republican from Maine who put country before party during the Watergate scandal. Cohen's decision to prioritize truth over loyalty helped hold Nixon accountable, and his story offers powerful lessons for navigating today's political divides.

As an extra treat or maybe a test of endurance, you'll also hear how Ryan's old heating system in his main office decided to make a surprise cameo during the interview. Here's our conversation.

So, Professor LaRoche, you related the conversation that we just had about Nixon and Trump and attacks against America's social safety net. I wanted to talk to you about this history you've been working on of William S. Cohen, who played a crucial role in the Watergate scandal during the Nixon administration.

So, to start off, can you tell me a little bit about William S. Cohen, who he is, and what role he played in the Watergate scandal?

Ryan: William Cohen was elected to the US House of Representatives as a Republican from Maine's second district, and he won the election for the first time in 1972. He then went on to serve in the United States Senate until he decided to retire in 1996, but his retirement was quite short-lived as shortly after he announced his retirement from the Senate, Democratic President Bill Clinton, asked him to serve as Secretary of Defense for the remainder of President Clinton's second term in office. Throughout his career, Cohen had a reputation for moderation, bipartisanship and really seeking the truth above any sort of partisan interest.

Much of this began with the role that he played during the impeachment proceedings in 1974. As a first term member of Congress, Cohen finds himself on the House Judiciary Committee, a committee he had chosen because he was a practicing attorney prior to being elected to Congress. The Judiciary Committee was charged with investigating what had happened in the midst of the Watergate scandal. The Republicans were in the minority at the time, so the committee was chaired by Democrat Peter Rodino, and there was a small group of moderate Republicans and moderate Democrats who worked together to make the impeachment articles which were eventually voted on bipartisan.

Throughout the hearings that the House Judiciary Committee was running in the summer of 1974. Cohen would investigate the facts of the case. And there are many stories of him clashing with Republican leadership, particularly Ed Hutchinson, who was the ranking Republican member on the judiciary committee.

Cohen could see clearly that Nixon had violated the law and had violated the Constitution. Cohen believed that the truth and the rule of law were more important than partisan interests. And so Cohen, eventually again joins with a group of moderate Republicans and most of the Democrats to advance two of the articles of impeachment against President Nixon, who then even resigns before he is formally impeached and convicted.

Avigail: So before we go on, we should probably give people a brief refresher on what the scandal itself was because of the lack of ethics there. I was gonna say the ethics, but no, the actual lack of ethics is really fundamentally what Cohen was objecting to.

Ryan: The Watergate scandal involves this break-in at the Watergate Hotel which is where the Democratic National Committee headquarters were. As the Judiciary committee and also the Senate Committee, which had met earlier in the summer of 74 had investigated this, it became clear that Nixon himself and members of his administration were involved in overseeing this break in. And, now, even paying some of the individuals who had been involved in the break in.

One of the things that becomes so central for Cohen is the fact that Nixon had violated his constitutional oath to protect the rule of law, to swear loyalty to the Constitution. This is before impeachment became much more widely used. This is only the second time that an impeachment proceeding had been brought against a sitting president. The only prior time was shortly after the Civil War against President Andrew Johnson.

Cohen understood the gravity of this. He understood that this was not something that should be taken lightly. Nixon was popular at the time, as you know, he won a massive reelection in 1972. He actually does better in Cohen's own district than Cohen did, so many of the Republicans charged the Democrats and moderate Republicans would say, you're just trying to overturn the election here. And Cohen continually pushes back against that and said, we're doing this because the president has violated the Constitution. We're doing this because the rule of law matters and that nobody should be above the law.

And that becomes, again, a central rallying cry that Cohen returns to, not just during this episode, but later on in his political career as well.

Avigail: So essentially Cohen is going against his political party, his colleagues, all in the name of his internal sense of what is right and just and ethical. So you've been working on this biography of Cohen. What have you learned about him, his life and his perspective on the world that might have guided his decision to really stand up to his colleagues and go against the very popular President.

Ryan: I think there are a few central pieces here. One is, Cohen considered himself in many ways an outsider. Even when he wins the election to the Congress he doesn't consider himself a party loyalist. And a lot of this comes from his own background. His father was, Jewish, but his mother was not. And so continually growing up, he felt like he was straddling the lines. There's a great quote that he's said to me a number of times where he said, "I felt half of both, but whole of neither," when talking about his upbringing. So he constantly felt like he was on the outside.

I think in many ways that developed within him. Just a streak for independence and not going along with what the party was doing or what his friends or colleagues might end up doing. In the midst of the impeachment proceedings, I believe his commitment to his family, and in particular, his young children at the time also shaped how he understood the gravity of the moment.

There's a quote that I found in the archives. Cohen did an oral history about the impeachment proceedings a few years after the Watergate scandal. And he was asked about how he was able to do this. He recalls a story when he's watching the nightly news with one of his sons who is watching at the time.

He asks his son, well, what do you think about what's going on? And his son says something to the effect of, I really wish we lived in a time like when George Washington was President, when we could trust that people and our leaders were doing the right thing. Again, not that George Washington was a perfect figure by any means, but you can imagine a young child at the time looking at somebody like Washington who embodied the spirit of ethics and values and truth. Cohen saw this spirit being broken in his own son. And I think that informed in many ways his decision to break with his party. Again, as I mentioned Cohen's father was Jewish. He was receiving intense anti-Semitic hate mail about his decision, people in his own district telling him to lay off the president, let him get back to what he's doing.

There had been death threats made against him and his family. A bomb threat had been called into the house at the time. And he still believes that the truth is what ultimately mattered here. And again, that's something that recurs throughout his career. He also was on the joint committee during the Iran-Contra scandal, another episode in American History where, Republican president, Ronald Reagan, perhaps oversaw or at least was unaware of, some secret government activities. And at that same exact moment, Cohen believes that the President should have known more, and he actually co-writes a book with his Democratic colleague, George Mitchell, laying out the fact that this was wrong and unconstitutional. Again, I think Cohen's career, in many ways, embodies this true public spirited leadership and a belief that the truth matters far more than climbing your way up the political ladder. Cohen talks a lot about how he made these decisions early on in his career, he knew he

would never rise to the ranks of Republican leadership in the House or the Senate. And he was okay with that. Again, he ended up being nominated to a cabinet position, not by a Republican, but by a Democrat, in part because of that independent streak he had demonstrated for at that point more than three decades.

Avigail: Well, I can't think of a more beautiful note to end on, particularly in this current political moment. So, Dr. LaRochelle, thank you again for coming on No Jargon.

Ryan: Yeah. Thank you for giving me a chance to talk a little bit about Bill Cohen.

Avigail: And thanks for listening. For more on Professor LaRochelle's work, check out our show notes at scholars.org/nojargon. No Jargon is the podcast of the Scholars Strategy Network, a nationwide organization that connects journalists, policy makers, and civic leaders with America's top researchers to improve policy and strength in democracy.

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