

## Twitter Thread by [Karl Grubaugh](#)



**[Karl Grubaugh](#)**

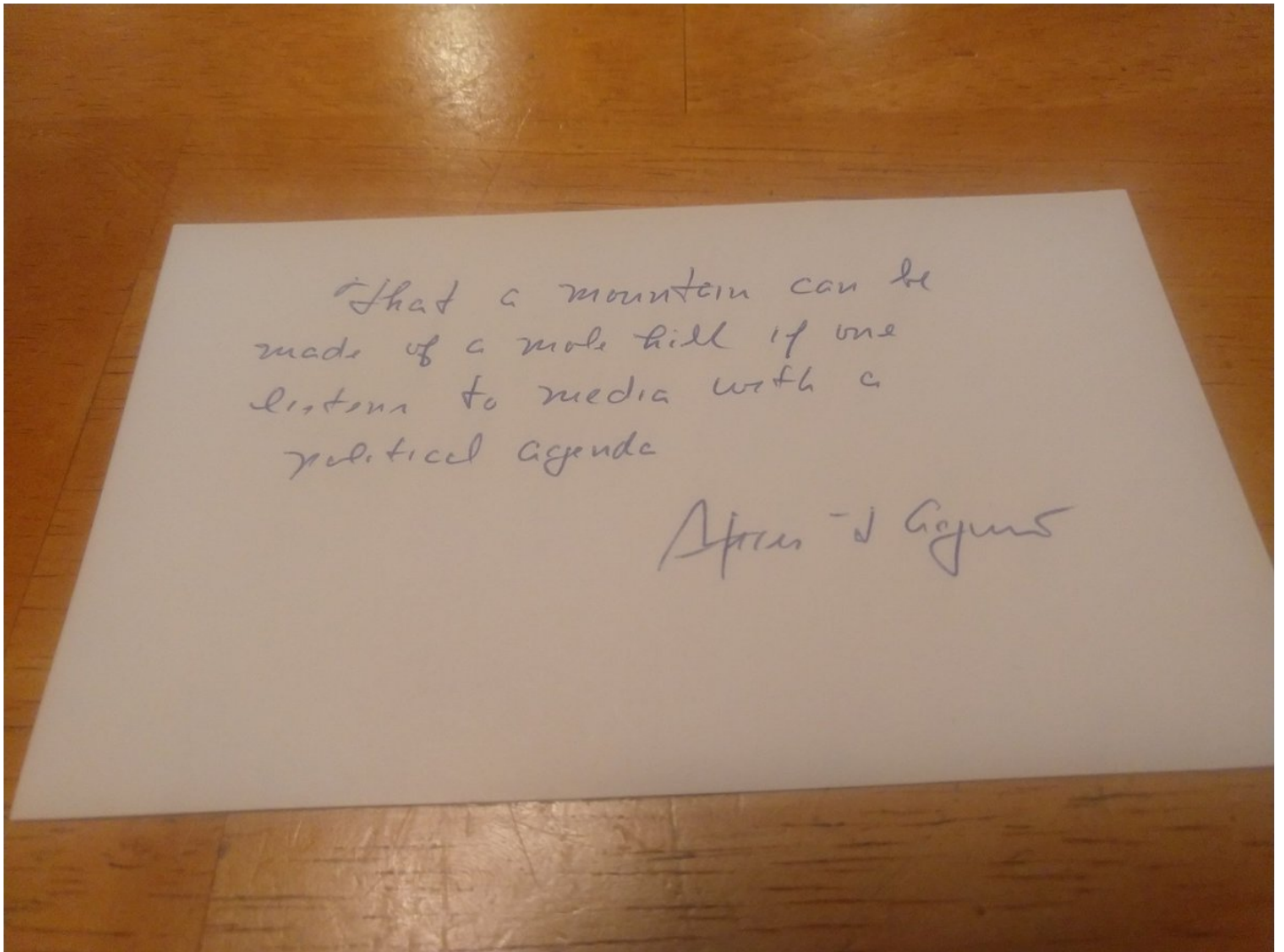
[@kgrubaugh](#)



A story ...

In 1994, I was teaching U.S. history and American government at Oak Ridge HS in El Dorado Hills, California.

I had three bright students who were my TAs. The 20th anniversary of Richard Nixon's resignation was a few months away. I decided to have ... 1/



my students -- Sherilyn Peek, Aaron Leahy and Nicole Poimiroo -- take on an extra project. They contacted dozens of people who were in some way involved with the Watergate saga. Politicians, lawyers, political appointees, journalists and others. 2/

They spent weeks, before the internet existed, tracking down addresses. Then they sent a short letter that asked the recipients to respond to one question: What should America learn from Watergate?

Before long, responses started to show up in my mailbox at school. 3/

Archibald Cox replied, and I'm especially struck by this sentence: "...we should be reminded of the corrupt influence of great power, especially when the power is in the hands of someone who is willing to resort to any tactics, however wrong, to retain and increase his power."4/



HARVARD LAW SCHOOL  
CAMBRIDGE - MASSACHUSETTS - 02138

May 24, 1994

Mr. Aaron Leahy  
Ms. Sherilyn Peek  
Ms. Nicole Poimiroo  
ORHS  
Attn: Mr. Karl Grubaugh  
1120 Harvard Way  
El Dorado Hills, CA 95762

Dear Aaron, Sherilyn and Nicole:

Your letter dated March 1 was delivered in the mail last Thursday. I am at a loss to explain the long delay and am very sorry that it occurred.

Nevertheless, I shall try to answer your question in the hope that the answer still will be helpful.

I think that thoughtful Americans should learn two things from the Watergate experience.

First, we should be reminded of the corrupt influence of great power, especially when the power is in the hands of someone who is willing to resort to any tactics, however wrong, to retain and increase his power. Perhaps it is inescapable that modern government vests extraordinary power in the President and puts around him a large circle of men and women whose personal status and satisfaction depends entirely upon pleasing that one man.

Second, thoughtful Americans should be reminded of the essential, but fragile character of our traditional constitutionalism - of the rule of law inherited from England, which holds that even the very highest officials are bound by law. Former President Nixon sought to challenge that rule and was overwhelmed by an aroused public opinion. We should remember that the rule depends upon constant vigilance.

I hope that this will be helpful. With best wishes.

Sincerely,

Archibald Cox  
Professor of Law, Emeritus

AC/cm

Richard Kleindienst wrote his response by hand ... "Our Constitution worked! The federal judiciary worked. The Congress and a free press worked. That our Constitution works is the magic of America." 5/

May 19, 1984

Favour Moore Wilhelmsen & Schuyler, P.A.

RICHARD G. KRUMHOLTZ

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1100 Plaza West Center  
Ft. Collins, CO 80521  
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Dear Aaron, Steven and Nicole:

When our founding fathers, under the guidance of Divine Providence, created our Constitution they obviously contemplated that a President and other high officials could breach their trust. Accordingly, the "impeachment" clause was included. For all practical purposes, President Nixon was impeached.

America should learn from Watergate "that our Constitution worked! The federal judiciary worked, the Congress worked and a free press worked. That our Constitution works is the magic of America. While we should always be sad when a person misuses his or her high office, we should, at all times, be ever thankful that we are free people living under the concept and protection of our Constitution.

Remember, because of our inalienable right of freedom, we have the means to deal with a "Watergate" and then go forward in a continual process of constructive change and progress.

Sincerely,

Richard G. Krumholtz  
Prescott, Arizona

Sen. George McGovern, the former Democratic presidential candidate who ran against Nixon in 1972, also wrote his short response by hand: "Heed the Constitution. Upholding the Constitution is the only oath a President takes." 6/

Dear Mr. George McGovern:

We are three high school students who are studying Watergate and its impact upon America. We would appreciate your answer to this question: What should America learn from Watergate?

We would greatly appreciate your response to this question, as we are compiling the responses of several political observers for an article which we hope to have published, so that other students will be able learn from your comments.

Thank you for your time and consideration of our request.

Most Appreciatively,

*Aaron Leahy*  
Aaron Leahy

*Sherilyn Peek*  
Sherilyn Peek

*Nicole Poimiroo*  
Nicole Poimiroo

The answer to your question is: Heed the Constitution. Upholding the Constitution is the only oath a President takes.

Please forward to us in care of:  
ORHS  
Attn: Mr. Karl Grubaugh  
1120 Harvard Way  
El Dorado Hills, CA 95762

*Don McDown*





March 8, 1984

Dear Mr. Robert Woodward:

We are three high school students who are studying Watergate and its impact upon America. We would appreciate your answer to this question: What should America learn from Watergate?

We would greatly appreciate your response to this question, as we are compiling the responses of several political observers for an article which we hope to have published, so that other students will be able learn from your comments.

Thank you for your time and consideration of our request.

Most Appreciatively,

*Aaron Leahy*  
Aaron Leahy

*Sherilyn Peek*  
Sherilyn Peek

*Nicole Poimitoo*  
Nicole Poimitoo

Dear students:

I believe the lesson that America should learn from Watergate is to be more careful in voting for political candidates and not to be misled by demagoguery and appeals to imaginary fears.

*Robert Woodward*

Please forward to us in care of:

DRHS

attn: Mr. Karl Grubaugh

120 Harvard Way

Dorado Hills, CA 95762

Former Congressman Pete McCloskey offered to meet with my students. U.S. District Judge Lee Gagliardi politely declined, citing his policy of not commenting on trials. (He didn't say which trial -- not Nixon's, of course, because there never was an impeachment trial.) 10/

Charles Wright, an attorney to Nixon, also declined to comment. 11/

CHARLES ALAN WRIGHT

WILLIAM B. BATES CHAIR FOR THE  
ADMINISTRATION OF JUSTICE

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS  
SCHOOL OF LAW

June 29, 1994

Aaron Leahy  
Sherilyn Peek  
Nicole Poimiroo  
ORHS  
1120 Harvard Way  
El Dorado Hills, California 95762

Dear Students:

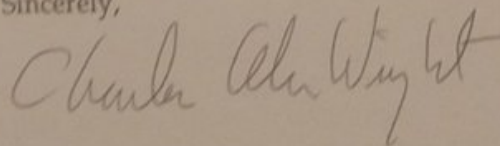
It embarrasses me a great deal that I am only now responding to your letter of March 8th. I always try to reply promptly to correspondence, but somehow your letter got misplaced and I did not see it again until this morning.

I am all the more embarrassed because I feel that I cannot really answer your question. I was involved in the Watergate matter as a lawyer. Of course I read the newspapers at the time and many books since, but a great deal of what I know about the case came to me in confidence in my position as attorney to the President of the United States. Because of that I have consistently taken the position for the 20 years since then that I should not comment on any matter that is related to Watergate. It is impossible to separate what I know as a newspaper reader and what I learned in confidence as an attorney and any comment I made would necessarily at least give the appearance of stemming from my position as an attorney.

I am sorry that for this reason I cannot answer your question. I think it very enterprising of you to be working on an article intended for publication on this subject. I hope you are successful and that the article is a good one.

Again my apologies for being so slow in answering.

Sincerely,



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Former Illinois Senator Charles Percy said he and Sen. Barry Goldwater of Arizona were assured by Nixon that "he knew nothing of the Watergate break-in. When the tapes subsequently proved that he did have knowledge of the break-in, it shattered us ... " 12/

CHARLES PERCY  
& ASSOCIATES, INC.  
International Relations & Trade Consultants

June 2, 1994

Charles H. Percy  
President

Aaron Leahy  
Sherilyn Peek  
Nicole Poimiroo  
c/o ORHS  
Attn: Mr. Karl Grubaugh  
1120 Harvard Way  
El Dorado Hills, CA 95762

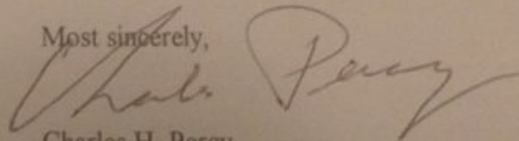
Dear Aaron, Sherilyn and Nicole:

You have asked what America should learn from Watergate. We have much to learn from that situation. It indicates that despite the fact that Richard Nixon did a magnificent job as President in establishing a relationship between the world's largest democracy and the largest nation on earth, China, helped bring to a close the Vietnam War, and signed the first major arms control agreement with the then Soviet Union, he is the first President that was forced to resign. Essentially, the most telling crime that he committed was to lie to the Congress of the United States and to the American people and to the world about his knowledge of the Watergate break-in.

Before the existence of the Watergate tapes was known to any of us, I personally urged President Nixon, together with then Senator Barry Goldwater, that he should go on television and tell the American people that what he did by authorizing a break-in to obtain Democratic party records involving Vietnam and other sensitive issues was caused by his belief that the campaign was dividing the country in a way that was unprecedented in the violence and other disruption that it created. I told President Nixon he should say that he did not have sufficient faith in the United States Constitutional system to work as it did, because actually in the election he was overwhelmingly re-elected. President Nixon told Barry Goldwater and myself in a meeting in the California Room of the White House that he knew nothing about the Watergate break-in. When the tapes subsequently proved that he did have knowledge of the break-in, it shattered us as well as the American people which then led to his forced resignation.

I hope this will be helpful to you, but I trust that you will also give President Nixon credit not only for his accomplishments abroad but also for the fact that he did many outstanding things in the domestic field. This includes his offering a plan for more universal health coverage which would have solved many of the problems which President Clinton is now attempting to find answers for in his own health reform program.

Most sincerely,



Charles H. Percy

John Wilson, who defended Bob Haldeman and John Erlichman and later became a judge, let his friend and author James Michner help answer the question and then concluded with this: "... The people must be eternally vigilant if our liberties are to be preserved." 13/

*Chambers of the*  
**HONORABLE JOHN J. WILSON**  
United States Bankruptcy Judge

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Aaron Leahy, Sherilyn Peek and Nicole Poimiroo  
**DATE:** June 2, 1994  
**RE:** Watergate

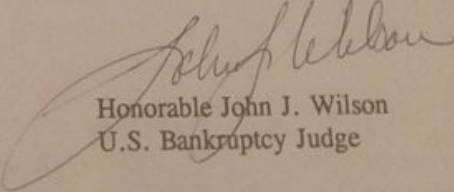
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Thank you for your March 8 letter about your school project. It did not reach me until late May and I apologize for my late response.

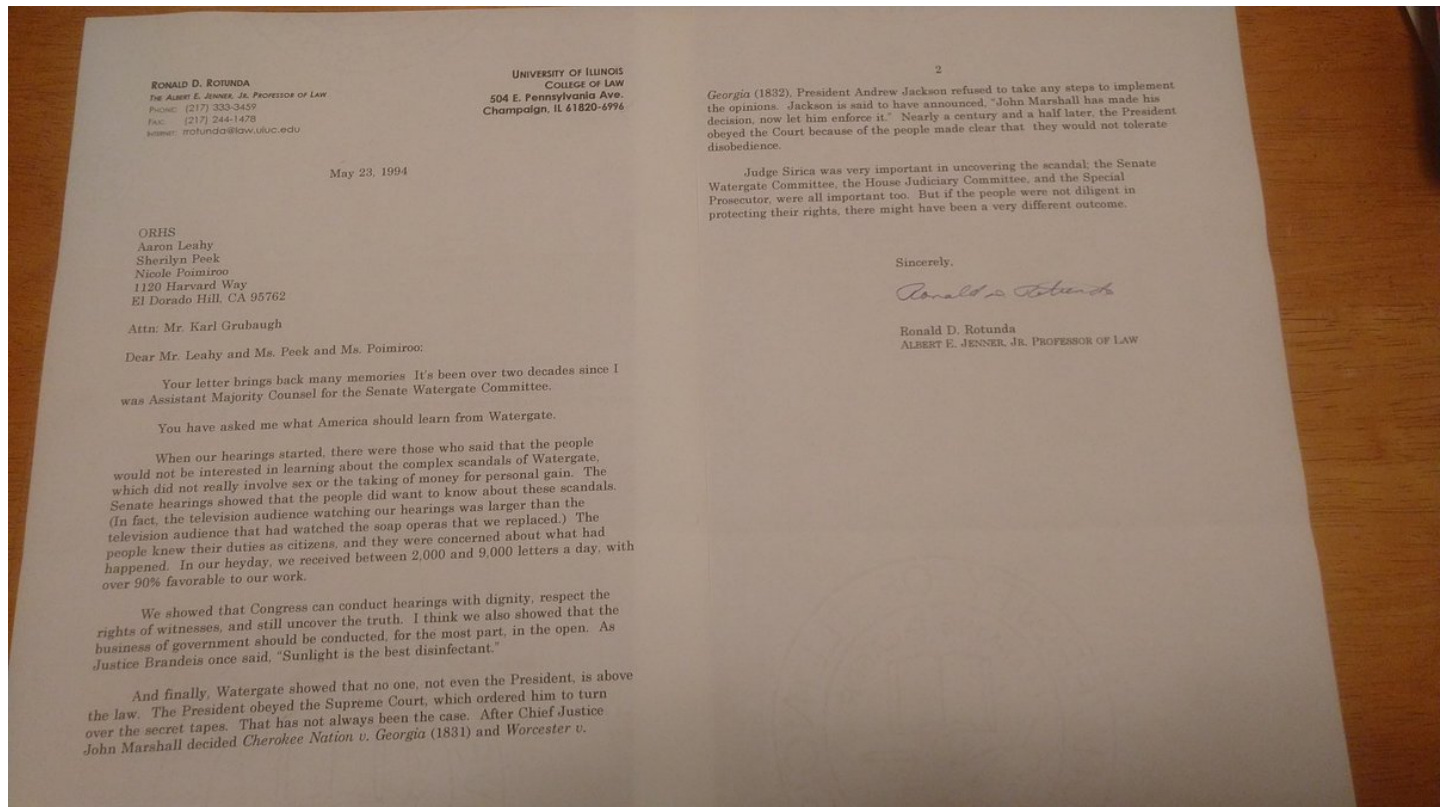
What should America learn from Watergate? There are dozens of answers, many of which you probably have heard. No person, even the president of the United States is above the law. Persons in high places are no less accountable for their actions than the common criminal.

After receiving your letter I asked my friend, the famous author James Michener, how he would answer your question. He said, "Each branch of the government (Executive, Legislative, Judicial), should respect the prerogatives of the other two." Watergate was an example of overreaching by the executive branch. The White House and others in the executive branch committed many acts of obstruction of justice thereby interfering with the legitimate functions of Congress and the judiciary. By exposing the wrongdoing we should learn not only that such conduct will not be tolerated, even in the White House, but also that the people must be eternally vigilant if our liberties are to be preserved.

Good luck on your project.

  
Honorable John J. Wilson  
U.S. Bankruptcy Judge

Ron Rotunda was assistant majority counsel for the Senate Watergate Committee ... 14/



The longest response came from Ron Ziegler, Nixon's former press secretary who worked for Nixon in San Clemente after the resignation before eventually becoming president and CEO of the National Association of Chain Drug Stores. 15/

He pumped up Nixon's accomplishments, attributed Nixon's resignation to having "lost the ability to lead," and then offered this partisan conclusion: "I learned from that experience that regardless of how disgraced a person might be, or how extensive ... " 16/

"... one's humiliation and failure is, only an individual can destroy himself. President Nixon clearly chose not to destroy himself. Instead, he learned from his past and as he had done throughout his career, made a comeback to become America's elder statesman ..." 17/

" ... a prolific author and a devoted husband, father and grandfather." /18



Jack Futterman  
Chairman of the Board  
Ronald L. Ziegler  
President & CEO

June 7, 1994

Mr. Aaron Leahy  
Ms. Sherilyn Peck  
Ms. Nicole Poimirro  
ORHS  
Attn: Mr. Karl Grubaugh  
1120 Harvard Way  
El Dorado Hills, CA 95762

Dear Aaron, Sherilyn and Nicole:

Thank you for your letter regarding the lessons America should learn from the Watergate tragedy. I commend you for your interest and desire to learn about this period of American History.

My years with President Nixon were important personally, not only because of the knowledge gained and lessons learned, but also as an opportunity to serve our country.

While some associate the Nixon presidency solely with Watergate, it is impossible to overlook the Nixon years without realizing the tremendous impact he had in both foreign affairs and domestic policy. As President Clinton eloquently stated at President Nixon's funeral, we should judge President Nixon on nothing less than the totality of his career. As you may have noticed during the media coverage during President Nixon's funeral, his accomplishments during fifty years of public service will undoubtedly overshadow Watergate.

Among the lessons to be learned from Watergate is one from President Nixon himself. President Nixon resigned the presidency because he felt he had lost the ability to lead the American people who elected him to office. Since leadership in a democracy is partially based on public opinion, President Nixon felt that without the support of the American people, he could no longer effectively lead the nation as President.

It is important to emphasize that every individual in our democratic system does count -- one's vote, thoughts and position do make a difference. It is the combined force of each individual's opinion that forms the strength of our government. With this remarkable privilege comes the obligation and responsibility for all of us to be informed, to learn from our past and to participate in our democratic system. No elected official, including the President, can obtain or remain in office without the support of a free society.

Mr. Aaron Leahy, Ms. Sherilyn Peck, Ms. Nicole Poimirro  
June 7, 1994  
Page 2

After the resignation, I flew to California with President Nixon into self-imposed exile. I did not know what to expect or how a man who had been disgraced and forced to resign from office would deal with the situation. The first morning, I looked across the property of what was called the Western White House and saw President Nixon walking, dressed not in a sport shirt, unshaven and beleaguered, but in a coat and tie, ready to move forward. He of course was tired and strained from the difficult days leading up to the resignation. However, he immediately began to use his mind in a disciplined manner, focusing on his shortcomings, the successes and failures of his Administration and analyzing his own actions and the actions of his staff.

I learned from that experience that regardless of how disgraced a person might be, or how extensive one's humiliation and failure is, only an individual can destroy himself. President Nixon clearly chose not to destroy himself. Instead, he learned from his past and as he had done throughout his career, made a comeback to become America's elder statesman, a prolific author and a devoted husband, father and grandfather.

As you face challenges in your lives, you will undoubtedly encounter setbacks, humiliation and shortcomings. I hope you are able to apply the lessons learned from President Nixon that only you can destroy yourself. You should learn from mistakes and apply them toward the future.

Education is an important stepping stone to a full and productive life. The three of you have obviously begun that journey and I wish you continued success.

Kind regards,



Ronald L. Ziegler  
President and Chief Executive Officer

After the semester ended, and Sherilyn, Aaron and Nicole graduated, I put all these letters in a file. The goal had been to compile them and put together an article looking back, 20 years later, at Watergate. /19

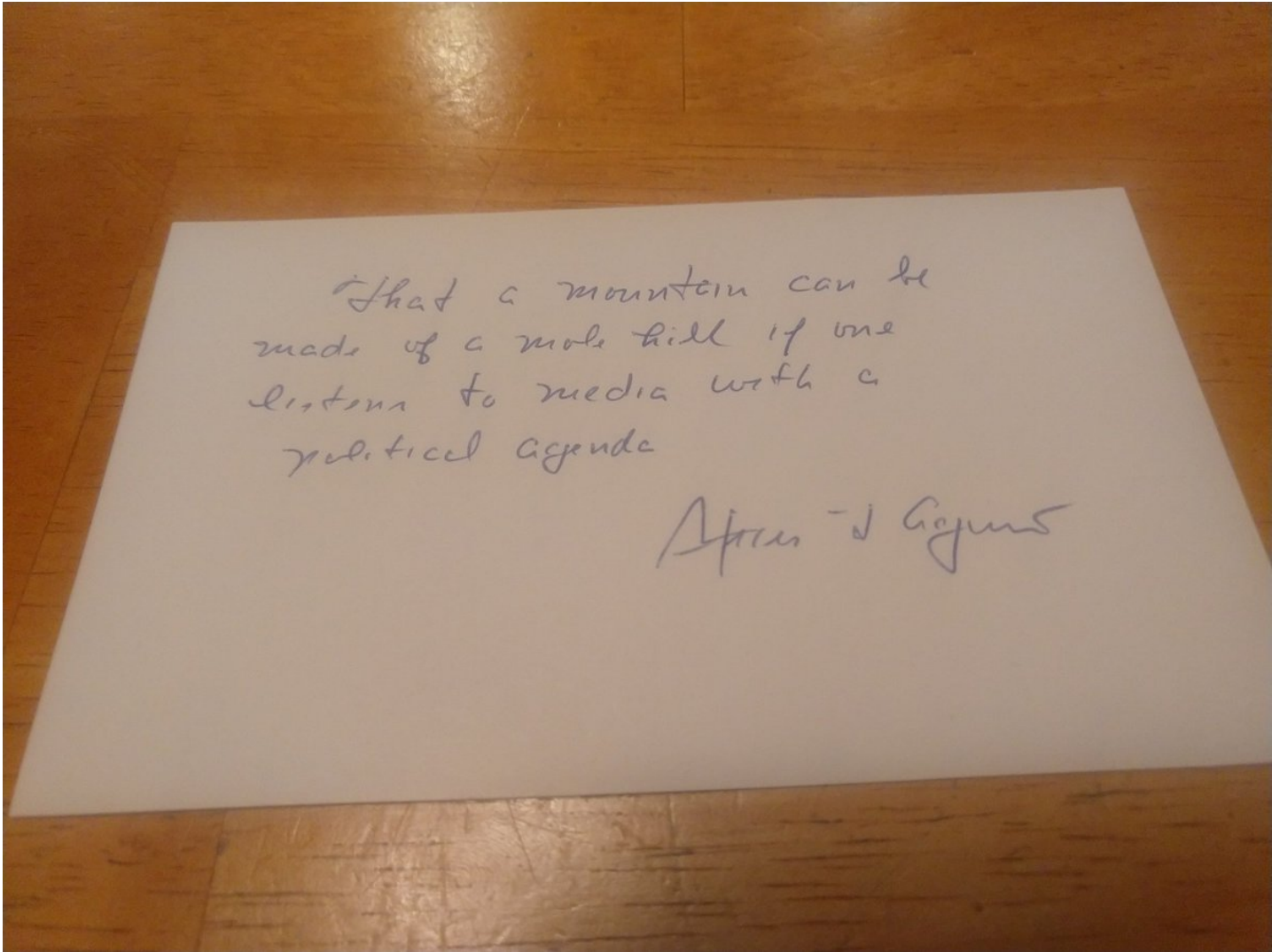
But I was busy, with young kids, and it just didn't happen. I'd see the file once in a while, think about the article, and then get back to teaching, being a husband and raising one, then two, then three kids. But now, more than 25 years later, I've just retired. 20/

I've been going through old files, and throwing most of them away ... but then I found this one. These recollections about a political scandal that happened almost 50 year ago (!) still seem, in these fraught days, especially timely. /21

Oh, and that 3x5 card I started this with? I had to puzzle that one out a bit, but then I saw it. That signature belongs to Spiro Agnew, the vice president who pleaded no contest to felony charges and resigned to avoid prison. 22/

What did Agnew say America should learn from Watergate?

"That a mountain can be made of a mole hill if one listens to media with a political agenda." 23/



That a mountain can be  
made of a mole hill if one  
listens to media with a  
political agenda

Spiro T. Agnew

All of these men who played a role in Watergate are dead now. But many of their words still resonate for me, through the mists of history. A few defended Nixon, or themselves. Most celebrated the Constitution and its effectiveness. 24/

But the most meaningful, for me, were those who made it clear that we must be vigilant. We have to pay attention.

Because as we've seen these last four years, the wrong person in the presidency can be catastrophic.

I hope we learn the lesson this time.

25/end

[@SpiroAgnewGhost](#) and [@maddow](#) ... Given your recent Agnew book, podcast and research assistance, I thought you might find this interesting ...

Correction: I said all these people who were connected to Watergate are dead. But the Washington Post's Bob Woodward is very much alive. My apologies.