

The Honorable Elizabeth Holtzman
U.S. Representative of New York (1973–1981)

Special Exhibit: A Century of Women in Congress

The System Worked

Representative Holtzman remembers the effective work accomplished by the House Judiciary Committee investigating Watergate.

Interview recorded March 10, 2016

So you had the Judiciary that did its job. And Judge Sirica, very conservative Republican judge, who smelled something fishy and threw this very tough sentence on the burglars and got one of them to crack and say, “Yeah, higher-ups were involved.” You had the Supreme Court voting unanimously requiring the Nixon tapes to be turned over, including people who had been appointed by Richard Nixon and who were Republicans. You had the House Judiciary Committee with new members and a brand-new committee chair—warts and all, no select committee—just being taken out of the regular order being used, rising to the occasion, doing what had to be done, winning the respect of the American people. You had the Senate acting in a bipartisan way. The Senate select committee, Howard Baker saying, “What did the President know and when did he know it?” That was going to be a question to show that the President didn’t know it, but it turned out to be the question that showed the President did know it. You had the press, two young reporters doing an amazing job, but also many other reporters doing an amazing job. So you had a President out of control, engaging in criminal conduct, abusing the powers of his office, but the rest of the system of government responding in a constitutional way as a check on the abuses. And I think that was something that is the more important lesson that the system worked at that time, and nobody knew whether it would work, and it did. And I was very amazed to be part of that process having not even sought to be on the committee—tried hard not to be on it—but I think the process worked, and the committee actually won the respect of the American people for the fairness, the thoroughness, the responsibility with which it behaved.