

**BIOGRAPHY**

## John J. Sirica

No one loomed larger in the struggle to get to the bottom of the Watergate case than John J. Sirica. Said *Time* magazine of Judge Sirica, by “stubbornly and doggedly pursuing the truth . . . regardless of its political implications, [he] forced Watergate into the light of investigative day.”

*As you read, think about the difference just one person can make in the course of history.*

**J**ohn J. Sirica was born in Connecticut in 1904 to an Italian immigrant father and an Italian American mother. Making a living proved difficult for his tubercular father, and the family moved often as his father searched for work. Young John took part-time jobs as a car greaser, waiter, and newsboy to help his family financially, all the while dreaming of becoming a lawyer. He first attempted to study law when he was 17, but lack of preparation forced him to drop out. After working as an auto mechanic and as a boxer, he tried again. This time he succeeded, graduating from Georgetown University Law School in 1926.

Sirica established a private law practice in Washington, D.C., and over the years was appointed to several government legal posts under Republican administrations. In 1944, he accepted a Democratic appointment to serve as general counsel on a congressional committee investigating a Federal Communications Commission matter. When he came to believe that the Democrats were attempting a cover-up, he angrily resigned: “I don’t want it on my conscience that anyone can say John Sirica . . . is a party to a whitewash.”

Sirica held to the same principles when the Watergate burglars came before his court in 1972.

By that time, he was chief judge of the U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C., having been appointed to the court during the Eisenhower administration. His tough stand on law and order and his severe sentences had earned him the nickname “Maximum John.” The tough sentences he imposed on the Watergate burglars helped to break the case, when the convicted James McCord disclosed information to Sirica about the burglary.

This major breakthrough was just the beginning of Sirica’s involvement with Watergate. He was the judge who ruled that President Nixon had to hand over the tapes of confidential conversations in the Oval Office. He also presided at the subsequent trials of Nixon aides H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman, both of whom he sentenced to prison terms.

Judge Sirica had his critics who said that his legal work was sloppy and that his sentences were too harsh. To most Americans, however, he became a hero. Said the respected newspaper *The Christian Science Monitor*, “He is nonpartisan in the administration of justice in the best tradition of the bench.” *Time* magazine named him its 1973 Man of the Year. Sirica retired from the bench and later died in 1993.

### CRITICAL THINKING

1. What disadvantages did John J. Sirica have to overcome to achieve his dream of becoming a lawyer?
2. In what ways was Judge Sirica involved with Watergate?
3. **Distinguishing False from Accurate Images** Judge Sirica projected an image that gained him the nickname “Maximum John.” Would you say this was a false or an accurate image? Why?