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The President's Watergate 'Confession'

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The President has confessed, and Martha Mitchell is vindicated.

You know what I mean about Mrs. Mitchell; they've been trying to paint her as mad as a hatter since last June when she told her husband that she would quit him unless he quit the Committee for the Re-Election of the President and "all those dirty things that go on."

But maybe you didn't know about the confession. That came Monday in the statement read by deputy White House press secretary Gerry Warren.

"I want to say this morning," said Warren, "that any suggestion that the President was aware of the Watergate operation is untrue; any suggestion that the President participated in any cover-up activity or activities is untrue; any suggestion that the President ever authorized the offering of clemency to anyone in this case is also false."

That is the statement that newspaper and television reporters called a "sweeping denial" of presidential culpability.

It would have been sweeping if Warren also had branded as false any suggestion that the President knew about the cover-up during the months between the Watergate break-in and that day in March when "serious charges... came to my attention."

Warren, of course, did no such thing. And that is why I call the statement a confession. It hits so hard on things that are peripheral or of which the President was never widely suspected,

and it pointedly ignores the central public suspicion: that Richard Nixon knew about, and perhaps encouraged, the massive cover-up that followed the first reports of political espionage, sabotage and well-financed burglary.

He passed up a chance to make an unequivocal denial when he took to national television a week earlier, and he passed it up again when he spoke, through Warren, to the assembled press in Florida.

This week's statement contained three denials: (1) that the President "was aware" of Watergate, (2) that he

"The President passed up a chance to make an unequivocal denial on national television . . ."

"participated" in the cover-up, and (3) that he authorized a clemency offer.

Accept the third one for what it's worth. But what do the other two mean? Surely the denial that he "was aware" of the thing must refer only to knowledge before the burglary, since every idiot in the land became aware of it afterward. Denial of direct presidential participation in the cover-up doesn't mean much, either. The top man, obviously, would not have to "participate" directly but simply let it be known what course of action he considered appropriate.

Warren refused to elaborate when reporters wanted to know whether he intended to distinguish between participation in the cover-up and knowledge

of the cover-up.

That refusal removed (from my mind) all about; it was a confession.

But it was not a confession of criminal involvement, and since it wasn't, it leaves the excruciating question of what penalty the President ought to pay. (I'm assuming that the worst thing he'll have to confess to, even indirectly, is that he knew about and condoned the cover-up.)

It's hard to imagine a grand jury returning an indictment charging the President with being an accessory to burglaries and wiretaps. And, at this stage, at least, it's hard to believe that impeachment is much of a probability.

On the other hand, it hardly seems right to let the President go right on as though nothing has happened. Mr. Nixon, facing the same sort of dilemma with his top two aides, solved it by letting them go.

Martha Mitchell had a similar suggestion, although her husband subsequently tried to obscure it with talk about her being "under the stress of the current situation."

What she said to UPI's Helen Thomas is this:

"Mr. President should resign immediately. I think he let the country down . . . He's been compromised."

And they try to make you think she's crazy.