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Exorcising Watergate

● "Let others spend their time dealing with the murky, small, unimportant, vicious little things. We will spend our time building a better world."

President Nixon, July 31, 1973

● "The pall of the Watergate, with all its revelations of misplaced loyalties, of strange measures of the unethical, of unusual doings in high places, and by lawyer after lawyer after lawyer, is upon us. It is something that necessarily touches us all, irrespective of political intention."

Justice Harry A. Blackmun, Aug. 5, 1973

● Which is it? The main line of the so-called Administration counterattack on the Senate Watergate investigation is to portray it as an orgy of partisan wallowing, which the President of the United States can and must stand above. The problem with this stance, as critics from the right as well as the left are increasingly pointing out, is that it is simply not credible.

The somber words of Justice Blackmun, a man hardly classified as a Presidential enemy since it was Mr. Nixon who named him to the Supreme Court, apparently struck a responsive chord at the American Bar Association convention, dominated this year by talk of Watergate. Robert W. Meserve, the group's outgoing president, said yesterday that Watergate and the paucity of public outrage against it pose "a threat to our liberties and to our very sense of decency." The legal profession in particular has room for outrage, for the "lawyer after lawyer after lawyer" to whom Justice Blackmun referred were not obscure attorneys representing questionable clients but rather individuals of prestige and power, upon whom much responsibility had been bestowed.

So far, on the appearances, no one at the top of this Administration has yet grasped the enormity of the offenses against the public trust of which it stands accused. The confrontation now forced on the issue of a President's right to suppress material evidence affecting potential criminal prosecutions is only the latest sign of mistaken belief that this, too, can be solved by "toughing it out."

Who can make the contrary case convincing? Normal institutional expressions of dissent are obviously still not encouraged at the White House. The Democratic leadership in Congress has rightly perceived that theirs is not an influence which can be effective at this point. It is those of the President's own party, independent Republicans with a genuine wish for Mr. Nixon's success in the remainder of his second Presidential term, who stand the best remaining chance of rescuing his injured Presidency. They alone seem in position to convert the present White House mood of insensitive toughness into one of conciliation, which can make effective leadership possible once again.