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The President's Story

Watergate has degenerated into a confusing set of rival claims about particular events. But no one should suppose, as Sen. William Proxmire seems to imply, that suspicion of the President rests merely on unsubstantiated charges by guilty men desperate to save their own skins.

On the contrary, the chief source of suspicion is the President's own account of what happened. A review of the evidence shows that Mr. Nixon's story virtually defies belief.

The President's story of his role in Watergate was set forth in his TV speech of April 30. In that speech Mr. Nixon declared that he first became aware of Watergate on June 17, 1972, with the apprehension of the men who attempted to break into Democratic headquarters. "I immediately ordered an investigation," Mr. Nixon said.

All through the investigation, Mr. Nixon further claimed, "I repeatedly asked... whether there was any reason to believe that members of my administration were in any way involved." The president said that in response to that question he received consistent denials, so "until March of this year" Mr. Nixon remained "convinced that the denials were true."

Thus the heart of the President's story is this: for nine months, from June 1972 to March 1973, he was in the dark about the extensive campaign of sabotage and espionage organized on his behalf during the election campaign although he tried "repeatedly" to get at the truth.

But compare that position with what we now know about the President's leading associates. Consider, first, former Atty. Gen. John Mitchell who was Mr. Nixon's closest personal and political associate. He directed the 1968 campaign for Mr. Nixon and he was director of the 1972 campaign at the time of the Watergate break-in.

Mr. Mitchell has said publicly that before the June 17 break-in he three times attended high-level meetings at which the project for bugging Democratic headquarters was discussed. So when the break-in took place, and Hunt and Liddy & Co. were apprehended, Mr. Mitchell was not in the dark. He knew it was part of the Republican campaign.

Accordingly, for Mr. Nixon's story to stand up, we have to believe that he

did not ask Mr. Mitchell about Watergate or that Mr. Mitchell lied to him when he asked. That is a lot to believe.

Then there is the case of former White House aide John Ehrlichman. Mr. Ehrlichman was, after Bob Haldeman, the No. 2 man at the White House. He worked on the closest terms with the President and saw him almost daily.

Mr. Ehrlichman, it now turns out, was deeply involved with Hunt and Liddy long before Watergate. He knew they had broken into the apartment of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist in California. He had even arranged for the Central Intelligence Agency to cooperate with them in the ventures.

So at the very least, Mr. Ehrlichman also knew something very gamy was afoot. But to believe Mr. Nixon's story requires that he and Mr. Ehrlichman

never said word one about it for nine months.

Finally, there's the case of Mr. Haldeman, the former White House chief of staff who was one of Mr. Nixon's closest associates. Mr. Haldeman has admitted nothing publicly.

But his own closest aide, former Appointments Secretary Dwight Chapin, did recruit a college friend, Donald Segretti, for political sabotage. Chapin told the President's lawyer, Herbert Kalmbach, to pay Segretti out of the secret campaign fund.

So at the very least Haldeman's closest aide knew that a campaign of sabotage and espionage was being conducted as part of the President's reelection effort. To have faith in Mr. Nixon's story requires the collateral belief that Haldeman was in the dark about the activities of his closest aide and kept the President equally in the dark despite Mr. Nixon's repeated efforts to find out.

What all this says is that the burden of proof is now on Mr. Nixon. The final verdict is not in. It makes sense to suspend judgment and to watch with care statements made before the courts and in the Senate hearing. But the man in the dock is not in doubt.

He is Mr. Nixon. Flat denials of particular points are not enough. The President has to show that he was elected with clean hands, that he did not know when he stood for reelection, five months after the Watergate break-in, that a very dirty game was being played in his name.