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Why Nixon Took So Long To Learn About Bugging

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Washington—The mystery is why the President took so long to find out about the Watergate. Elementary, my dear Watson. The man does not read the newspapers.

Richard Nixon's aversion to newsprint and wordsmiths goes back over his whole political career.

When he got to the White House, the President took steps to get the newspapers out of his hair forever. One of his aides, Patrick Buchanan, prepares a daily digest, which for all we know contains only the football scores.

IT WAS NATURAL, then, that when the campaign came along, the President's men would set up their own sources of information—or "intelligence," as they prefer to call it. It was, as we newspaper readers were to find out, an elaborate apparatus, which cost millions, but it was worth it to them. They hired students to go out in the field and spy.

Through them, the President learned that he might be up against "Honest Abe" Muskie, a dangerous adversary by White House reckoning. The students sent in their reports and it probably was weeks after the event that President learned from them that Muskie's candidacy had breathed its last in Wisconsin on April 6.

All along, John Mitchell tells us now, he was vetoing a more direct way of getting information, and eventually was overruled. The installation of electronic surveillance at Democratic headquarters seems more inevitable than sinister. By the time they got it installed,

it was evident that George McGovern was going to be the nominee.

The work of providing a faster and more direct news flow—which was to be called intercepted oral communications at the trial—ran into a snag. Seven men were arrested at the Watergate on June 17.

The President wanted to take all necessary steps, short of reading the papers, to find out why and how it happened.

He appointed his young counsel, John W. Dean 3d, to investigate. Dean had to do the best he could with the FBI reports provided him by L. Patrick Gray 3d.

The FBI, in turn, was not about to compromise itself by perusing the Eastern establishment press, with the result that much of what they discovered already had been printed in the papers.

In fact, at no time was anyone either on the White House staff or the Committee for the Re-election of the President suspected of having opened any newspaper.

ALL THIS changed on March 21, when the President suddenly signed on as chief investigator in the case. An unconfirmed rumor holds that he passed the desk of a White House guard who had negligently left a newspaper on it. The President is alleged to have caught sight of a headline which indicated that some of the people closest to him might be on their way to becoming numbers rather than names.

The President has clung to his principles throughout. He was still this week reported as "vigorously pursuing the search for truth."