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White House and Watergate: A 'Misunderstanding'

pat 3/20/74

There has been a lot of shredding, erasing, losing, deep-sinking, burning, hushing, conspiring, suborning, perjurying, resisting, defying, firing, resigning by Mr. Nixon and some of his employees since certain of them, operating with his money and in his name, conceived, authorized, organized, staffed, financed and administered the Watergate break-in and cover-up.

And Mr. Nixon has not responded with lightning indignation when stumbling upon his in-house crime waves. On March 17, 1973, he learned about the Ellsberg burglary. On April 25 the Attorney General found out about it. Then Mr. Nixon ordered the information sent "immediately" (his word) to the judge in the Ellsberg trial.

On March 21, 1973, John Dean told Mr. Nixon he had been paying hush money to Watergate defendants. On April 23 Mr. Nixon announced that he had called Dean to assure him, "You're still my counsel." On April 30 he fired him. Today Mr. Nixon refuses to surrender tapes of Watergate-related conversations.

This is why some incorrigible skeptics doubt the intensity of Mr. Nixon's reiterated desire to "get the whole

story out." But to give the President his due, the crux of his story has not varied for 10 months, since May 22, 1973. That's when he issued a written statement, one of his earliest explanations of everything. He said:

"It would appear that one factor at work was that at critical points various people, each with his own perspective and his own responsibilities, saw the same situations with different eyes and heard the same words with different ears."

Mr. Nixon's story is that a lot of his employees ran amok because of some dreadful misunderstandings of his stated wishes. People kept misconstruing his words.

For example, Egil Krogh, head of the plumbers unit, ordered the Ellsberg burglary. He thought he was complying with Mr. Nixon's forcefully expressed desire that "the unit should find out all it could about Mr. Ellsberg's associates and his motives." (Mr. Nixon, May 22 statement.) Mr. Nixon has said (May 22) that the burglary was a dreadful but understandable misunderstanding. "Because of the emphasis I put on the importance of protecting national security, I can under-

stand how highly motivated individuals could have felt justified in engaging in specific activities that I would have disapproved."

Krogh's "misunderstanding" is indeed understandable. He reported directly to John Ehrlichman, who reported directly to Mr. Nixon. Three weeks before the burglary Krogh wrote a memorandum to Ehrlichman: "We would recommend that a covert operation be undertaken to examine all the medical files still held by Ellsberg's psychiatrist." Ehrlichman's written approval: "If done under your assurance that it is not traceable," Ehrlichman says he did not think he was approving burglary. He says the burglary was a dreadful misunderstanding of his words.

On Sept. 15, 1972, when the grand jury indicted only seven people in connection with the Watergate break-in, Mr. Nixon said something complimentary to John Dean. Mr. Dean, who had been struggling to keep the lid on the cover-up, thought he was being complimented for his struggle. So he struggled on. The White House says this was a dreadful misunderstanding.

On March 21, 1973, Mr. Nixon said "it would be wrong," and he says he

meant that it would be wrong to offer hush money and clemency to silence Watergate defendants. But evidently there was a dreadful misunderstanding. Or, at least, Mr. Nixon's words were in vain. Somehow Mr. Nixon's friends paid \$75,000 of Mr. Nixon's leftover campaign funds as hush money a few hours after Mr. Nixon says he voiced his disapproval.

The White House story appears to be this. The Ellsberg burglary and the Watergate cover-up resulted, in large measure, from inadvertent misunderstandings by people who couldn't get straight what Mr. Nixon was saying he wanted. Students of Ogden Nash's poetry will recognize this as the "Uncle Hannibal the Cannibal" defense:

*I often grieve for Uncle Hannibal
Who inadvertently became a cannibal
He asked Aunt Mary to roast the
gobbler;
She understood him to say, the cob-*

bler.
If I understand the White House story correctly, Mr. Nixon is like Uncle Hannibal. And Krogh and even Dean are like Aunt Mary, whose zeal exceeded her judgment, and who did wrong in a cause she deeply believed to be right.