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White House Rotten Apples

WASHINGTON — The Watergate scandal now reaches so far it is difficult not to suspect that President Richard Nixon is either a fool or a knave.

It is now apparent that many of the most important domestic advisers in the President's close circle have been involved to some degree in the systematic spending of hundreds of thousands of dollars for criminal espionage and the subsequent cover-up of same.

IT IS NO LONGER possible to make excuses for the President, as though he were on some other planet while all this was going on and bore no responsibility for his own campaign managers and their activities.

The most generous interpretation of the Watergate operation is that Nixon was made a fool of by men whom he had trusted for many years. That assumes they conspired to deceive him in total disregard of possible consequences. The assumption, however, makes the President out to be terribly naive, which is a new image for him.

In that case, Nixon's judgment of character is exposed to be the worst of any modern President. (Eisenhower had one rotten apple, Sherman Adams; Johnson had two, Walter Jenkins and Bobby Baker. But Nixon has a whole barrel full right inside the White House.)

The toughest interpretation of Watergate is that Nixon ordered or condoned a wide-

spread program of illegal activities and then approved a payoff to participants to keep their mouths shut about it. Frightening as it is, the possibility has to be considered. The President, remember, has repeatedly said that he is always his own campaign manager and makes all the important decisions himself.

It requires a great deal of good faith to believe that the President suddenly grew so disinterested in politics last year he didn't pay attention to how large sums of cash were being spent.

It requires a great deal of faith to believe that it was mere coincidence the President named one of the men most deeply involved in the crime to conduct the White House investigation of it.

It requires a great deal of faith to believe that if intelligence reports on the enemy camp were floating around inside the White House they did not reach the chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman; and that if they reached Haldeman he withheld them from the President.

NO MATTER how you look at it, Nixon's role in the Watergate crime is not an admirable one. He cannot be absolved of blame. Either he should have kept better track of what was being spent and done in his name or he was a party to it.

Nixon had almost lived down his youthful label as "Tricky Dick." It is ironic that his long political career has come full circle, back to that old derisive term.