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A Compulsive Fighter...

Enough facts have emerged about the mystery of the Watergate case to make clear that somebody very high in President Nixon's entourage directed it, dispensed the money, organized the spies and saboteurs and approved the plans. That much, it can be safely asserted, is fact. From a fact, a supposition is in order and the supposition leads to a mystery as large as the Watergate itself.

The supposition is this: If President Nixon did not know who planned the Watergate beforehand—and it is hard to believe that he did—he knows now. For it is equally hard to believe that a man in his position would not be at pains to ask questions and get answers. Thus, the mystery. Why doesn't the President say what he knows?

Would it not be better to take to the television over the heads of investigators and press and tell the public that he has been tricked and misled and lied to? It would not be an easy speech to make. But it could be done and the President would probably find the public understanding. Everybody knows what it feels like to be tricked or lied to. The President might be blamed for being gullible or for creating the atmosphere in which lies can be told—but that blame is easier to accept than its alternative.

The alternative is to let the story come out piece by piece, leading inevitably to the disclosure suggested above—namely that somebody very high in the President's circle planned and approved the entire operation. What is the President to do then? Pretend surprise? Tell us that even after the scandal broke, he didn't—or couldn't—find out who that person was?

Mr. Nixon is already in great trouble on the Watergate but the alternative to full disclosure could put him in even greater trouble. What is the answer to the mystery which keeps him on the defensive, permitting his aides to criticize the critics while he maintains silence about things he knows?

The answer, it seems to me, is that Richard Nixon is a compulsive fighter and, like all compulsive fighters, he likes quarrels.

A good example of the President's compulsive instinct for a fight was his last televised address to the nation. Consider how he handled this problem:

His first task was to announce controls on meat. Few fault him for that. Why not accept inevitable applause? What did he do instead? He blamed high prices on the Congress and en-

couraged his listeners to start a letter campaign against Congress. Naturally, the Congress was furious.

Second, the President talked about foreign policy. Here, again, he was on broad, sunlit uplands. The prisoners were home; the troops were out; everybody was grateful. Why not repeat an earlier theme: "Bring us together." What did he do instead? He blasted the "small but vocal minority" whose sin, apparently, was to urge him to do what he had done; he beseeched his audience to be unforgiving toward

"those who deserted America," and he boasted about "peace with honor."

In other words, he picked three absolutely unnecessary fights. First, with the war opponents he had so recently appeased; second, with those whose children had confronted their consciences by choosing jail or exile instead of the draft; third, with those who had urged a tougher policy in Vietnam and, who, with some justice, see no "peace" there now and don't agree with him about the "honor." In short, at a time when his critics were in disarray, reduced to grudging and partial approbation of his course, an opportunity to call for unity became an occasion to pick new fights.

The Watergate is a pretty severe wound to this country. It makes the product of Washington and Jefferson look as corrupt and shabby as a banana republic. Mr. Nixon could do a lot to heal this wound. But compulsive fighters don't try to heal.

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