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Why Didn't the President Ask the CIA?

President Nixon's statement Tuesday, with its remarkable admission that he did after all impose national security limitations on the Watergate investigation, instead of winning sympathy from Capitol Hill supporters of his hard-line foreign policy has now spawned two steel-edged questions from them:

Question No. 1: it has been long standing practice for the President of the United States personally to approve or "sign off" all highly sensitive covert operations of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Why then did Mr. Nixon say that "elements of the early post-Watergate reports led me to suspect, incorrectly, that the CIA had been in some way involved"? Should he not have automatically known?

Question No. 2: assuming, however, he did not know, Mr. Nixon needed only to telephone CIA headquarters at Langley, Va., on a secure scrambler telephone to find out the truth. Why did he not immediately place that call? The answers almost surely will lead to one of two interpretations: either the President was deeply, hopelessly involved in the Watergate cover-up, or he was far removed from the daily flow of events in the government to a degree

probably unprecedented in U.S. history. The latter interpretation, damning though it is, might at least salvage his presidency for the remainder of the second term.

In either event, however, the President's hope that his Tuesday statement would rally around him the bipartisan national security coalition—especially Democratic Sen. Henry M. Jackson of Washington—has failed. Jackson, a staunch supporter of Mr. Nixon's foreign policy and his first choice to be Secretary of Defense, was appalled by the President's third Watergate statement.

So were a great many other senators, deeply disturbed by testimony from CIA officials that the White House tried to involve the CIA in the Watergate cover-up. Unanswered questions posed by Mr. Nixon's statement make doubly sure a close cross-examination of ex-White House aides H. R. (Bob) Haldeman, John Ehrlichman and John Dean when they appear at closed-door Senate Appropriations Committee sessions. Sooner or later, the slow-moving Ervin committee's probe will get to them in open session.

In advance of their testimony, many senators not previously known as Nixon haters now think the worst of the Presi-

dent, "I'm convinced now that he's up to his neck in the cover-up," one powerful senator told us.

But that harsh view may not take into account the astonishing isolation and remoteness of a President who shunned all routine details of government, who communed with only a very few staffers and who did not even read the newspapers. Indeed, if Mr. Nixon was not a conspirator, his Tuesday statement makes sense only in the context of an eerily detached presidency unique in modern American politics.

Although previous presidents were informed of any CIA operation with potentially embarrassing repercussions, Nixon aides say some such capers were planned without Mr. Nixon's knowledge. Similarly, while other presidents would have immediately called the CIA, these officials now say Mr. Nixon relied on Ehrlichman and Haldeman to ask Lt. Gen. Vernon Walters, deputy CIA director, a full six days after the Watergate burglary.

But since Walters replied there was no CIA connection, the question now is why Mr. Nixon bothered even to mention in his statement that he was in doubt, when the doubt could only have

spanned a couple of days. But that statement was perforce written in a fog bank of confusion, explain his aides.

Unable to remember details, cut off now from Ehrlichman, Haldeman and Dean, and unwilling to contact CIA officials for fear of being accused of contriving a second cover-up, Mr. Nixon confronted unavoidable inconsistencies stemming from ignorance rather than complicity, these aides say.

Furthermore, as in other Watergate matters, the White House wants deposed White House counsel Dean to get the full blame for trying to pin the Watergate burglary on the CIA. But close students of the Nixon White House cannot believe John Dean would act on his own.

So, Senate investigators will be trying to find whether Dean sought to implicate the CIA on the orders of Ehrlichman and Haldeman or of Mr. Nixon himself. Some of the President's old Senate supporters strongly suspect the worst. The White House hopes they will find that Mr. Nixon was merely incompetent.