

Joseph Kraft

The Trail Of Broken Fixes

font
7/19/73

Why does Watergate keep going on and on and on? How come it doesn't fit the neat beginning-middle-and-end pattern of the six crises the President made famous in the past?

The answer is that the stopper cannot be applied because the Watergate corruption runs too deep and involves too many men with well-founded suspicions of each other. Nothing directly shows that better than the trail of broken fixes which led directly to the most recent big development in the scandal—the revelation of taps on the President's phone calls and conversations.

The first fix effort came hours after the arrest of the burglars at Democratic National Committee headquarters. Two officials of the President's re-election campaign—Gordon Liddy and Powell Moore—went out to Burning Tree golf club to see Atty. Gen. Richard Kleindienst. Their purpose was to free the one prisoner who connected the burglary with higher-ups—James McCord. But Kleindienst did not trust them, so McCord stayed in prison and eventually went on trial.

A second cover-up effort came with the trial. But unlike the other six defendants, McCord would not take a dive in return for money and promises of an early release from jail. He provided the first big break in the case by making public the efforts to have him take a dive.

Immediately afterward, the President's men went to work on McCord. His evidence was badmouthed as the merest hearsay. Even Lowell Weicker, the Connecticut Republican on the Watergate committee who has been so zealous in pursuing the truth, warned the McCord story might be a trap.

But McCord's testimony led to a White House official active in trying to hush up witnesses — special counsel John Dean. Mr. Dean became worried that he was being set up by the President and the men around him as a scapegoat. So he began to talk.

As soon as Dean testified to the Senate Watergate committee, an effort to put him down was launched. Former Atty. Gen. John Mitchell told the committee that what Dean called a move to fix the original Watergate trial was in

fact merely designed to raise money for lawyers and bail. After that, White House special counsel Richard Moore, testifying on his own motion, raised doubts as to Dean's assertion the President had known about the Watergate cover-up for months.

At that point, Watergate had become a matter of Dean's word against the word of Mitchell and Moore. It looked like the whole case would turn around fine issues of judgment.

In those circumstances the staff of the Senate Watergate committee began poking around for evidence to support one version or the other. Alexander Butterfield, a former White House aide who had gone on to head the Federal Aviation Administration, was asked almost casually whether he knew if any of Dean's conversations with the President might have been recorded.

The question put Mr. Butterfield on the spot. He did not know that his immediate boss, Lawrence Higby, had told

the committee staff there were no recordings; nor that Higby's superior, H. R. Haldeman, had withheld comment about the tapes. So Butterfield, left in the dark by men who did not trust him, broke the news of the taping operation.

The disclosure of the tapes puts the President more behind the Watergate eight ball than he has ever been. If he is innocent of the Dean charges, there is documentary evidence to prove it. So any failure to make the tapes available

can only be seen as a confession of guilt.

Even if the tapes did clear the President of the Dean charges, he would not be out of the woods. For one thing, the mere fact of the concealed taping has shocked the capital and especially the oldtimers here as a dirty, lowdown trick. For another, if the tapes did clear the President, everyone would want to know why he allowed the country to go through such agony before producing

the evidence. Moreover, he would still have to face the music on an explosive charge that has come up with Watergate—the charge of using public moneys to build himself a fancy house in San Clemente.

So the trail of broken fixes has put Mr. Nixon in a no-win situation. It is up to him to find an exit. But until he does, one sure bet is that Watergate will continue to go on and on and on.

© 1973, Publishers-Hall Syndicate