

Administration Wasn't Certain It Didn't Have Hand In Bugging

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WASHINGTON — When five men, including three with high Republican connections, were arrested here during an early hours break-in of the Democratic National Headquarters, a cold chill fell across the White House.

The first thought was that someone in the Republican party — or worse, at the White House itself — had au-

thorized the attempt to bug the Democratic offices, a deplorable act of political espionage.

It is now reasonably certain the White House was not a party to the affair. But it was not until Thursday — six days after the arrests — that President Nixon was ready to stand before reporters and flatly declare that "the White House has had no involvement whatever in this particular incident."

AS HAVE other Republican leaders, the President noted that "this kind of activity . . . has no place whatever in our electoral process, or in our governmental process."

Outsiders were ready to believe the worst partly because the Nixon administration had previously shown more than passing interest in electronic eavesdropping, having put forward legal arguments why the President had an "inherent right" to authorize the use of wiretaps and bugs without prior court approval when he deemed it necessary for the protection of the "existing structure of government."

Former Atty. Gen. John N. Mitchell, who now heads Nixon's re-election committee, had been a leading proponent of expanded executive use of wiretaps and bugs to monitor such domestic organizations as the Black Panthers.

LAST MONDAY, while the five alleged bugging artists were getting accustomed to their new quarters in the District of Columbia jail, the U.S. Supreme Court was handing down its opinion of the Nixon-Mitchell argument.

In a unanimous decision, the court ruled that granting such sweeping power to the president would be in clear violation of the fourth amendment. "More than our privacy is implicated," said Associate Justice William O. Douglas in a concurring opinion. "Also at stake is the

reach of the government's power to intimidate its critics."

White House aides in the wake of the arrests were extremely reticent about discussing the incident, not because they knew anything about it, necessarily, but because they just couldn't be certain there was no administration involvement.

WHITE HOUSE press secretary Ronald Ziegler, vainly trying to play down the affair, wrote it off as "a third-rate alleged burglary attempt" not worthy of White House comment.

"I did not comment on the Irving (book) hoax situation," he told reporters, "and I did not comment on robberies that took place in various regions of the country, and I am not going to comment on some group of guys who put on surgical gloves and allegedly went in and tried to bug a place."

White House special counsel Charles Colson, a tough, shadowy political operator, who often handles "spot projects" for the President, turned up as a close friend of one of those implicated in the bugging.

IT WAS a measure of these uneasiness at the White House when Colson, his right hand raised, "swore" before presidential assistant John D. Ehrlichman that he knew nothing about the matter and had not dispatched his implicated friend, E. Howard Hunt, a former White House part-time consultant, to Miami on a recruiting mission two weeks ago.

By week's end White House staffers began to breathe easier, having convinced themselves there was no inside involvement. But with a tight clamp on information or even discussion of the case still in force among the President's men, many questions remained unanswered.