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Behind Watergate

An air of unreality surrounds the Watergate political espionage trial. The prosecution, in presenting its case, went out of its way to portray the defendants' alleged offenses as something of a Republican protective-reaction strike against villainy anticipated from President Nixon's Democratic opposition. Earl J. Silbert, the Assistant United States Attorney, said in his opening statement that the assignments given to the defendants resulted from concern that "extremists" might disrupt campaign appearances by Cabinet officers and others serving as surrogates for Mr. Nixon.

Such points, one would think, might more appropriately have been made by the defense. Coming from the prosecution, they underscore the awkward nature of a trial in which the Administration's Department of Justice conducts the prosecution of criminal acts committed in the cause of re-electing that same Administration.

Final judgment concerning the proceedings must, of course, be deferred until the trial of all seven defendants has been concluded. But it is disconcerting that E. Howard Hunt Jr., former White House consultant, who played a major role in the break-in and eavesdropping conspiracy, appears to have been permanently removed from questioning in open court by pleading guilty to all the charges against him. Even though the Government has said that it would seek to summon him later before a grand jury for questioning about his knowledge of the Watergate affair, it appears that the jury and the public have been denied access—perhaps permanently—to a major source of information.

The question that cries out for answer is not who were the hired agents but who hired them. The cast of characters on trial had connections that reached at least to the President's outer office. The funds used—and substantial amounts are still unaccounted for—appear to have come from safes and checkbooks under the control of former Cabinet officers.

Because these entanglements come so close to the White House, the appointment of a special and independent prosecutor would have done much to bolster confidence that the court proceedings would be conducted with vigor and detachment. Now, only the most intensive questioning of witnesses can assure the public that, in the aftermath of this disgraceful and bungled affair, the hirelings will not be sacrificed for the protection of higher authority. What is involved in this case is not merely an irregularity in an election campaign that is past and gone; the issue is the integrity and credibility of an Administration that must continue to be accountable to the American people for the next four years.