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The Watergate Specter

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MIAMI BEACH — High-rise Euphoria enveloping the Republican National Convention has been somewhat reduced by this grim word passed to state party leaders by presidential aides: Expect more bad news soon about the Watergate Caper.

Perhaps as early as this week, these aides have warned, criminal indictments will be returned against officials in President Nixon's campaign organization in connection with the break-in at Democratic National Headquarters in Washington's Watergate building. What's more, the impact of the expected indictments will be all the worse, some Nixon lieutenants admit privately, because of unwise high-level strategy decisions made weeks ago.

Thus, the specter of the Watergate Caper has a double meaning for the Republicans assembled here. It is a needless, potentially dangerous issue in Mr. Nixon's re-election campaign against Sen. George McGovern. But even if it never reaches its potential danger point, the handling of the Watergate Caper by the Nixon campaign organization is giving thoughtful Republicans the shakes over how other sticky questions

will be handled in the weeks ahead.

JUST WHO WILL be indicted is not now being revealed, but presidential aides say the accused will be the middle-level operatives already publicly implicated. Chief Nixon fundraiser Maurice Stans, who may be forced to resign, is not expected to face criminal action.

But even if a John Mitchell or a Maurice Stans is not directly implicated, indictment of little-known Nixon lieutenants will contradict earlier protests of innocence and provide fuel for McGovern. The reason goes back to a major tactical dispute among presidential aides, which began on June 17 when the Watergate buggers were caught redhanded.

At that time, several political and public relations aides at the White House submitted this advice in written memoranda: Don't hide anything; the instant any evidence implicates a Nixon aide, take it at once to the public; the watchword should be that we have nothing to hide.

In the fuzzy formlessness that passes for political decision-making in the Nixon White House, there is no sign these memoranda were

ever discussed. Nor is it likely that the President directly involved himself at that stage. However murky the decision-making process, there was no doubt whatever about the decision: The policy of openness was rejected.

SOME PRESIDENTIAL aides say a recommendation to that effect was made by White House political operative Charles Colson. But the basic decision came from two lawyers who believe in giving the public the least possible information—John Dean at the White House and Robert Mardian (former Assistant Attorney General) at the Nixon Re-election Committee.

Dean and Mardian, in turn, reflect the closed-door politics of former Attorney General John Mitchell, Mr. Nixon's campaign manager at the time of the Watergate Caper. There is the unmistakable Mitchell touch in the policy of reveal-nothing, admit-nothing and apologize-for-nothing adopted for the Watergate Caper (just now replaced by a belated move toward more candor by Clark MacGregor, Mitchell's successor).

The Mitchell Policy held through June when G. Gordon Liddy was fired as the

Re-election Committee's finance counsel for refusing to answer FBI questions about the Watergate outrage. Under the open policy recommended but rejected, this would have been quickly publicized. Instead, Liddy's firing leaked out weeks later, reinforcing the impression of something to hide.

The button-down policy is at work in the determination not to reveal who contributed \$10 million to Mr. Nixon just before the deadline requiring public exposure. Republican leaders in close states—most notably New York—would rather not have McGovern talking about a \$10 million "secret fund" all autumn. Indeed some McGovern advisers believe this could be more politically lucrative than the Watergate Caper.

In short, the suspicion and hostility of Mr. Nixon's domestic advisers in dealing with the outside world persist after nearly four years. That's one reason why state Republican leaders here have little confidence in the President's campaign organization and thank their lucky stars that McGovern's seemingly unending blunders so far dwarf Republican mistakes.