

Nixon Counteroffensive

Watergate Move Seen as Strategy To Demolish Issue of a 'Cover-Up'

By R. W. APPLE Jr. 4/19/73
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WASHINGTON, April 18—President Nixon's striking statement about the Watergate case yesterday was in keeping with his reliance on bold action in the face of crisis.

By taking the counteroffensive, his associates in the White House believe, he hopes to show that he sinned not but was sinned against, to portray himself as the prosecutor and not the protector of those to be

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prosecuted. It is, in effect, a preemptive strategy. Get the possible culprits before the grand jury and let

the courts work their will; settle the civil suits out of court; above all, demolish the subsidiary issue that had become paramount in recent days: "The White House cover-up." Having done all that, so the thinking goes, there is little to worry about from the Senate's investigation, which certainly threatened to do more damage politically than any other conceivable proceeding.

But why did Mr. Nixon suddenly decide that the moment of crisis, the moment for riposte, had finally arrived?

One thing is clear. He would never have arrived at the point represented by his two announcements yesterday without the relentless pursuit of the bugging episode by the press, by Senator Sam J. Ervin Jr. of North Carolina, chairman of the investigating committee, and by Federal Judge John J. Sirica, who presided over the trial of the Watergate conspirators.

The President and most of his advisers, as well as large numbers of people outside the White House, thought the issue had been buried in Mr. Nixon's landslide victory of last November. The issue had not taken hold during the electoral campaign, most political analysts now agree, because the elec-

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torate simply could not accept Senator George McGovern as a reasonable alternative, regardless of the Watergate break-in.

But Mr. Ervin, Judge Sirica and dozens of reporters saw to it that new questions were raised, day after day, until their cumulative weight demanded some straight answers.

Beyond that, there are two possible explanations of the President's turnabout:

¶That, as Mr. Nixon and his spokesmen said yesterday, his previous denials of White House involvement were raised on inadequate information, that the new information produced early this year convinced the President that he might have been wrong, that he himself then swung into action, and that he then decided to take the lead in finding the truth.

¶That Mr. Nixon, or at least some of his principal associates, have suspected for some time the involvement of White House officials in the Watergate episode; that political pressure—as opposed to any new information—built to the point where it could no longer be met with a stone wall of silence, and that Mr. Nixon finally presented himself as the catalyst of the new developments before he was further embarrassed.

In a less direct fashion, the two possibilities were stated by

the chairmen of the two parties today at the National Press Club. And they are likely to be debated frequently in the weeks ahead, after the initial sense of relief engendered by the President's announcements has worn off.

At a press club luncheon, Robert S. Strauss, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, suggested that "the credibility of the office of the Presidency" may have been "struck and cracked and fractured" by Mr. Nixon's handling of the case.

George Bush, the Republican chairman, welcomed the President's exposition of the situation and said he had always believed that the matter "could and would be cleared up by disclosure" from the White House.

The residual conviction of many in Washington that the White House has been covering up, that it is now willing to own up to information it has possessed for a long time only because of political pressure, was symbolized by a bitter exchange at this morning's White House press briefing.

Clark Mollenhoff, a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter who once worked for the Nixon Administration, angrily accused the Presidential press secretary, Ronald L. Ziegler, of having lied to him on two occasions about Watergate developments. He repeatedly demanded a public apology from Mr. Ziegler.

"I stand on my previous statement," Mr. Ziegler replied. Then a few moments later: "I have nothing to say."

"Do you feel free to stand up there," shouted Mr. Mollenhoff, "and lie and put out misinformation and then come around later and say it's all 'inoperative'?" That's what you're doing. You're not entitled to any credibility at all."

Mr. Ziegler enunciated a new White House policy with regard to the Watergate affair, announcing that he was "not in a position to answer any questions no matter how they are phrased" on the subject. To answer queries, he said, "could very well prejudice the prosecution or the rights of innocent individuals or indeed the judicial process itself."

Mr. Ziegler may not be able to hold to that policy as the expected indictments unfold and more information about what happened in the White House discussions of Watergate strategy gradually comes into the open.

There can be no doubt that the attention of the American public has been engaged. A new Gallup Poll this weekend will show that more than 80 per cent of the public is aware of the case, that a plurality of those questioned think Mr. Nixon knew about it all along, and that more than a third think it betokens widespread corruption in the Administration.