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WASHINGTON — At the forthcoming impeachment hearings, the case against President Nixon will be based largely upon the work of the FBI, which uncovered 90 per cent of the Watergate conspiracy.

This will be awkward for the President who has always championed the FBI. After he graduated from Duke University, he even tried to become an FBI agent.

Those who favor impeachment consider it good strategy, therefore, to stress their reliance upon the FBI. Contrary to the public impression, it wasn't investigative reporters but FBI agents who dug out most of the Watergate facts.

The White House tried to head off the FBI investigation by obstructing the agents, throwing out false leads and crying national security. At White House instigation, former CIA director Richard Helms and deputy director Vernon Walters asked the FBI to lay off sensitive Watergate matters, falsely claiming it would jeopardize CIA operations.

But the FBI pressed doggedly ahead. Early in 1973, the top FBI brass checked upon the investigation to make sure it was being handled properly. Robert E. Gebhardt, who headed the General Investigative Division, reported back confidentially to Associate Director W. Mark Felt on Feb. 23, 1973:

"The handling of the Watergate investigation from the headquarters level through the field operation level was done in accordance with procedures, both administrative and investigative, that are customarily employed in any major investigative effort by the FBI.

"Among cases handled in the recent past in which similar procedures were followed are: the assassination of Martin Luther King; Capitol bombing, March 1, 1971; and major kidnapping cases such as the Barbara Jane Mackle case."

Most of the agents who developed the Watergate case, meanwhile, are still doing the sleuthing for the special prosecutors.

DEATHBED PROMISE:

Friends who are close to the human Richard Nixon tell us he faithfully kept a promise he made to Dwight Eisenhower on the late President's deathbed.

Two days before Ike died, President Nixon paid his last visit to the old general at Washington's Walter Reed Army Hospital. "Dick," said the dying Eisenhower, "there's one thing I want you to promise me. I want you to be as good to Lyndon Johnson as he has been to me."

Nixon gave his word. Our sources say he squelched moves by his subordinates to hunt for scandals in the Johnson administration and use them to

embarrass the Democrats in the 1970 and 1972 elections.

"Would you go after Johnson?" he would ask. If he thought the revelations might hurt Johnson personally, Nixon would say no.

When Johnson died on Jan. 22, 1973, President Nixon ordered his full Cabinet to attend special services. "Earlier today," directed a January 23 memo to all Cabinet members, "your office was contacted with the request from the President that you attend the Rotunda services for former President Johnson..."

EPIDEMIC OF PILLS: The federal crackdown on heroin apparently has caused America's drug users to turn to pills and powders meant for medical purposes.

This is the import of new figures submitted to Capitol Hill by the Customs Service. The figures are based on Customs seizures, which often reflect the American drug scene more accurately than do drug arrests and convictions.

The new figures show that through April, heroin seizures have declined almost 68 per cent during fiscal 1974, compared with the same period a year ago. Opium confiscation is down 83 per cent.

Yet during the same period, the seizures of barbiturates, pep pills and other medical drugs have increased a staggering 371 per cent.

U.S. drug companies, large and small, must report drug sales to the federal government. To get around this, the drug companies simply are shipping the pills out of the country to foreign wholesalers whose sales aren't subject to U.S. inspection.

These wholesalers ship the drugs to smugglers below the border or in the West Indies, who bring them clandestinely back into the United States in crate-size lots.

Footnote: The ethical pharmaceutical industry insists it can't control what foreign wholesalers do with the drugs. The U.S. companies, however, ship huge amounts of drugs out of the country, knowing the amounts far exceed the needs for medicinal purposes.

BASH FOR BIBLE: Interior Secretary Rogers Morton threw a bash the other night for retiring Sen. Alan Bible, D-Nev., and Rep. Julia Butler Hansen, D-Wash., at the stately Arlington House.

Outdoor torch lighting, wooden steps to the patio and other frills were installed at the taxpayers' expense. For the Arlington house, a Virginia estate, is run by the National Parks Service.

Food and liquor for the 100 guests was paid from a special Parks Service "discretionary fund," from souvenir sales. The fund has been set aside for promotion, entertainment and the like. An official spokesman said Morton's extravaganza cost \$2,000. An official source said it was closer to \$18,000.