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Watergate: Finding a Sacrificial Lamb

The President has reversed his Watergate game plan, and the initial reaction from the Washington bigwigs is that we'll finally get the truth about that scandal.

Perhaps. What we are far more likely to get is a sacrificial lamb or two.

Any hard look at the President's remarks about "major developments" in the Watergate scandal reveals that once you get past the drama of the fact that he said anything at all, he didn't say very much. One wonders, in fact, whether he could have said much less, faced as he was with truly enormous pressure from his party's faithful and from conservatives generally.

There was also pressure of another sort. Newsmen—and most notably Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward of this newspaper—were turning up more and more footprints that seemed to be leading in the general direction of Pennsylvania Avenue. The cumulative effect of that reporting, taken with the impact of the Ervin committee's investigations, was beginning, finally, to seep through to the people.

That is to say, the earlier White House game plan—ignore it and it will blow away—wasn't working. It not only wasn't going away; it was getting a lot closer to home. And so:

"On March 21, as a result of serious charges which came to my attention, some of which were publicly reported, I began intensive new inquiries into this whole matter."

That's the President talking. And what had happened on March 21? That's the day the dam of silence broke, that's what.

Until then, all those implicated in the scandal were hanging tough, either pretending nothing serious had happened, insisting they knew nothing about what had happened, or pleading guilty without elaboration.

But Judge John J. Sirica, who tried the so-called Watergate Seven, wouldn't be frustrated by the plead-guilty-and-shut-up ploy. He handled the sentencing procedure in such a way as to encourage the defendants to tell all in exchange for leniency.

On March 21, one of them yielded. James McCord delivered to Judge Sirica a letter containing new charges and allegations, and hinting strongly that some administration higher-ups knew full well what was going on.

"Is the President looking for a way to cushion adverse political impact, or is he looking for truth?"

That's the day the results of an earlier White House investigation became suddenly inoperative.

It will be interesting to see what the new investigation turns up; but that is of relatively minor importance now.

The damage to Mr. Nixon's credibility came not so much from what was covered up but from the act of covering it up. Hard-digging reporters, congressional investigators and embarrassed Republicans, adding up what evidence there was, concluded that something was putrefying and badly needed air. The President invoked his executive privilege of keeping the windows closed.

Not very surprisingly, the stench grew. It finally got bad enough so that the President was at least willing to talk about letting in some fresh air.

As I count it, Mr. Nixon made about

one and a half concessions in his Tuesday statement. He decided it was bad policy, as far as his own eroding credibility was concerned, to stick to his insistence on across-the-board executive privilege. That's one.

He also promised to suspend any White House staffer (or any other government employee) indicted in the scandal and to fire any such person upon conviction. In other words, if you get caught, you've had it. That's a half concession at best.

It still isn't clear just how seriously the President is taking the official corruption that clearly reaches far beyond the luxury real estate that gave it a name. That is, does he want to find out—and let all of us find out—just what was going on and who it involved? Or does he merely want to gauge how much is likely to be found out anyway and give us just that much?

To put it another way, is he looking for a way to cushion adverse political impact, or is he looking for truth?

The answer to that one can be gauged by the size of the lamb that everyone is so certain will shortly be sacrificed.

That one will be excruciatingly difficult to play. It clearly won't do to sacrifice any lamb whose name isn't pretty widely known. That's too cheap.

And it may not be enough to let the entire weight fall on the likes of White House counsel John Dean and former John Mitchell aide Jeb Stuart Magruder, perhaps the most likely candidates for the lambs' role. If the public perception is that the two men were sacrificed for the protection of some higher-up, it could turn out to be worse than no sacrifice at all.

On the other hand, if the lamb is a real biggie — say, the size of staff director H. R. Haldeman — who would believe that the President himself didn't know what was going on?