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Matter of Fact

The Five Men Who Hold Daggers

Also WXPost, same date, ~~NixAd~~ filed Watergate

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THE REMNANT of the President's palace guard was visibly shaken, a few days ago, by an episode most people regarded as another bad Watergate joke.

After a refreshing rest up the Hudson, to begin with, Martha Mitchell made a new kind of public appearance.

After pretty apologies for keeping the press waiting, Mrs. Mitchell said that her John was innocent of all wrong-doing; that the only fault lay with "Mr. President"; and that "Mr. President" ought to resign. She had said it all before. The different circumstances were what struck a new, alarming note.

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GIVEN those circumstances, this particular installment in the Martha Mitchell serial must clearly have been tolerated, if not directly stimulated, by Mrs. Mitchell's husband. That was clearly confirmed late the same evening, when Mrs. Mitchell sought her usual solace on the telephone.

The same gramophone record about the need for "Mr. President" to resign was played by the lady once again. But this time Mrs. Mitchell's husband was present and also ready to talk. The President's former Attorney General and closest adviser took the telephone from his wife, to add a qualifying word about the President's blamelessness, and then to swear that no one was going to make him into a "fall guy."

The tale is here re-told, in order to highlight what shook some people at the White House. Mitchell's novel role and Mitchell's oddly contradictory words were the sole sources of disquiet.

The plain truth is that the President's misplaced trust has effectively put daggers in the hands of five men who served him in confidential capacities. These five are John Mitchell, first and foremost; and then former Secretary of Commerce Maurice Stans, because of his role as Republican bagman; and the three White House staff members, H. R. Haldeman, John Ehrlichman and Charles Colson.

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WHAT THE lesser fry say they "believed" about the President, or "supposed" were the wishes of the President, is perfectly meaningless. Nothing about the President's role is proved by what a man like James McCord says — unless McCord can produce a piece of paper initialled "RMN," or can get backing from higher up.

The five with daggers, in contrast, are subject to no such tests. Any one of them can plunge a dagger straight into the President's back. Simply by saying, "Yes, the President knew about the whole ugly business. In fact, he ordered it."

If just one of these five chooses to say that much, it will not even matter whether the man in question is lying or telling the truth. Because of the past positions occupied by these five, it will be fatal if the President is accused of knowledge and complicity by a single one of them.