

The Missing Reassurance

by Meg Greenfield [deputy editorial writer, WkPost]

These thoughts were impelled by lunch with a White House friend. Few insights were exchanged. It was, in truth, a rather raw and inconclusive affair. But one question (his) was left hanging in the air, and I have been thinking about it since. "What do you people want?" he asked at one point. "What is it you really think should happen?" It wasn't, God knows, an offer. It was a perplexed inquiry that translated roughly as follows: "What do you people really want from Richard Nixon? Will you allow him any defense? Or do you require his total humiliation?"

The context, of course, was Watergate, and "you people" meant not just The Washington Post or even the press as such, but rather that large and growing generality of people who, no matter what the President does, seem to think it's not enough. There was reproach mixed with the curiosity From the point of view, I suspect, of many people, he continues to withhold a single indispensable assurance and one that must probably precede any genuine resolution of the question of his role in their minds.

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... But there is something else that has to do with [how much the President "knew"] which is ... unresolved and which strikes me as being at the heart of many people's failure to be satisfied with Mr. Nixon's response to date. It is the fact that there is no evidence in either the President's actions since March or, more importantly, in his three public statements since then, that he understands now what was wrong - what was really wrong - about the clandestine, thug-like things that were going on. That, it seems to me, is the key reassurance that is missing.

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... In short, people who may still be prepared to believe that Mr. Nixon never knew in relevant detail what was being done in his name, have yet to be given assurance that - even now - the President understands what was so special and so wrong about it.