

The Truth Unfolds

From the very beginning of the Watergate scandal, there has been a persistent attempt by the White House and the Commission to Re-Elect the President to conceal how widespread this espionage-and-sabotage operation was and how many highly-placed persons were involved. Events in recent days have done much to indicate how complex and devious this attempted cover-up apparently has been.

L. Patrick Gray 3d, acting director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, told the Senate Judiciary Committee that President Nixon's counsel, John W. Dean 3d, "probably" lied to the bureau agents when they began their Watergate investigation last June. Mr. Dean reportedly told the F.B.I. that he needed to check before he could say whether one of the Watergate defendants had an office in the White House when, in fact, he had already directed a search of the office and had its files in his possession. Mr. Dean has denied the Gray version, but his denial cannot be wholly convincing as long as he persists in refusing to testify before the Senate committee.

Yesterday a letter from James W. McCord, one of the convicted defendants in the Watergate case, was made public by the judge. In it Mr. McCord asserts that he and the other defendants were subjected to heavy pressure to plead guilty and avoid a trial, that perjury was committed in the trial by witnesses who carefully did not tell all they knew, and that he and his family have reason to fear retribution if he tells the truth now.

The most sinister line in this letter is Mr. McCord's statement that he would not feel safe in confessing to F.B.I. agents or any representatives of the Justice Department. He regards them as merely a conduit back to the people who masterminded both the original espionage operation and the subsequent cover-up. His fear is understandable.

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The acting director of the F.B.I. has testified that he turned all of the agency's Watergate interviews over to Mr. Dean, including even those from three employees of the Committee to Re-Elect the President who sought out the F.B.I. to give information which they had been afraid to give in the presence of their committee superiors. That shocking breach of confidence might prompt anyone to be uneasy.

If the whole truth about this ugly business is now at last to become known, it is fitting that Mr. McCord should open the way. A retired Central Intelligence Agency employe, who served as security coordinator for the Nixon campaign committee, Mr. McCord was the person whose arrest in the Watergate break-in alerted the press to the case's significance. He was also the first person to be disavowed in the subsequent cover-up. On the day after the arrests John N. Mitchell, then the Nixon campaign chairman, said, "he [McCord] has, as we understand it, a number of business clients and interests, and we have no knowledge of there relationships."

In novels, a spy who is caught expects to be disavowed. He takes his punishment and keeps his mouth shut. But that fictional standard has no place in a campaign to re-elect the head of state in America's supposedly open open democracy. Mr. McCord's decision to tell all he knows may yet lead to the truth about his extraordinary web of chicanery and deceit.