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Mr. Nixon's Responsibility To Explain Watergate

A cardinal assumption of the Anglo-American public heritage is that justice must not only be done but also must be seen by the people to have been done. In the Watergate scandal, nothing is so plain as that justice must not only be done but must be done with all possible dispatch.

For the miasma surrounding "Watergate"—a catchall term for the bugging last year of Democratic national headquarters in the Watergate building that has come to imply a Republican attempt to subvert the electoral process through the use of unclean campaign money—has now become a clear and present danger to orderly national government.

President Nixon has most belatedly recognized the gravity of this business, by directing a new investigation outside the White House, some of whose own people are under fire. This approach will have the proper effect of leaving any ultimate criminal verdicts where they belong and only where they belong—to the courts.

Yet it may impede a Senate inquiry which need not and should not concern itself so much with violations of law as with the question of violations

of the standards of public ethics. Senators cannot rightly call men who are simultaneously appearing before a Washington grand jury as either material witnesses or potentially indicted defendants.

In brief, the President's action is good in the sense that it leaves to the courts what is properly the concern only of the courts. But it is not good in the sense that it tends to silence the Senate investigation or, at best, to defer its procedures.

And the central fact is that delay in finding all the truth is the very last thing that is needed. Washington is so alive with ugly reports and rumors—of new indictments, of resignations—that important people within the administration are in a state approaching panic and bureaucratic paralysis. Clearly they cannot in these circumstances give to the high affairs of government that single-minded preoccupation to which the country—and the President himself—is so clearly entitled.

"You don't know these days who you can talk to in the White House," says a Nixon administration official.

At a time when so much is still so unclear and a grand jury is sitting, no responsible commentator will let the moving finger write words of unlimited accusation that never could be recalled, simply to be "out in front of the story." All the same, it is fair to say at least that every scrap of available information that can be responsibly obtained suggests that "Watergate" is rising into the dimensions of a national political convulsion.

It is therefore absolutely indispensable for the sake of the country that the President move without an instant's delay to discharge anyone truly implicated—for improper behavior, whether or not touched with criminality—and that he not allow the grand jury proceedings to overwhelm the Senate inquiry. If men cannot be called before the Senate without harming their rights as prospective criminal defendants—and these rights must be protected—the President has another way to fulfill his obligation to the public. He can and should see to it that the country is fully informed of any and all Watergate improprieties, quite apart from whatever criminal charges are brought.

Above all, a way must be found to let the country know exactly what the President's own course of conduct has been throughout this affair. If, as one hopes and believes, he had no real connection but was, instead, let down by associates, the nation must know this. No one should want to put the President of the United States on the witness stand. My suggestion is that on his own motion he go to the people at the earliest moment consistent with the orderly processes of justice.