

NYTimes APR 23 1973 Beyond Watergate

The questions of who did what and with whose approval in the Watergate affair must of course be asked in the effort to punish past wrongdoings and prevent future scandals of this nature. Inevitably, too, any proceedings involving those close to the summit of power exercise a lurid hold on the public's fascination. But to pay attention merely to the specific criminal details or to the Who's Who of the cast is to miss the real significance of this sordid chapter of American governmental history.

What has happened is that a web of deception has been interposed between the American people and their Government. High-ranking officials act in secrecy, without holding themselves accountable to anyone. Their sole justification for such usurpation of power is that they are the President's surrogates. When the legality of their actions is challenged, they first deny knowledge of any wrongdoing, then hide behind the privilege of being accountable only to their master, and finally, under pressure of accumulated evidence, admit that they knew that others were involved, while maintaining their own innocence. All the while, every effort is made—and President Nixon himself has until recently personally presided over that effort—to keep the investigation in the hands of those who are being investigated, or at best their close associates.

The scenario is not confined to Watergate. The abuse of power and the evasion of accountability is by now an established pattern.

Only after intensive questioning by the Senate concerning the relationship between the high commands of the Justice Department and of the International Telephone and Telegraph Corporation, while antitrust suits were pending against I.T.T. and after the company's secret offers of political contributions had come to light, did former Attorney General John N. Mitchell admit that he had discussed the Government's antitrust policies privately with I.T.T.'s president.

Once again, in the Watergate affair, Mr. Mitchell has admitted at this late date that he had known of proposals of political espionage against the opposition party. It may be perfectly true that Mr. Mitchell opposed such action; but this does not answer the question why he—until recently the nation's highest legal officer—remained silent until now. The inference to be drawn from such silence can only be that high officials of this Administration consider themselves a class apart, not responsible to the people nor subject to those who try to uphold the laws that govern ordinary Americans.

Similarly, Richard Kleindienst, the current Attorney General, confronts the Senate with the astonishing doctrine that neither he nor any other member of the executive branch need respond to questions by Congress if the President commands silence. Less than one week later, Mr. Kleindienst voluntarily disqualifies himself from the Watergate investigation, but only after it has become apparent that some of his close associates are under a cloud.

The combination of secrecy and arrogance on the part of a coterie of appointed officials in the inner sanctum of Presidential power has created a serious threat to constitutional government. Such rule by an unresponsive oligarchy would be unacceptable even if the President's surrogates acted on the highest level of ethics and morality. It becomes an affront to lawful government when briefcases and safes are stuffed with hot cash to finance illegal activities.

When the ways of the mob become the ways of the President's surrogates, the people's faith in government is the victim. This is why the issue is no longer merely one of specific offenses or offenders. It is not just a matter—as some of Mr. Nixon's latest remarks suggest—of dropping the delinquent members of the crew and riding out the storm. What has been created is an essentially undemocratic apparatus of men, money and arrogant power. Until that apparatus is dismantled, and its oligarchy stripped of its extralegal prerogatives, the American people's trust in their Government will not be restored.