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Truth NYTimes And Consequences: I

By Anthony Lewis

LONDON, May 9—The original arrests in the Watergate break-in occurred on June 17, 1972. Two weeks later, to the day, John Mitchell resigned as manager of President Nixon's re-election campaign.

Mitchell had managed the successful Nixon run in 1968. For three years he had been Attorney General. Now he was resigning at the very start of the new campaign. Is it conceivable that the President had no real discussion with him about his remarkable decision to withdraw at that point? Was their farewell chat limited to bromides about the sultry weather in Washington?

According to John Mitchell's recent statement, he had three times been present when Republican officials proposed espionage against the Democrats. He objected, he said—though evidently with not enough force to have any effect. In any case, he must have known in June, 1972, what was really involved in Watergate. Is it conceivable that in suddenly resigning from the campaign he gave Mr. Nixon no hint, no warning against trying to dismiss the affair as a mere caper?

Questions of that kind have disappeared by now in the daily outpouring of Watergate confessions, explanations and charges. It is worth recalling them because in a sense they lie at the heart of the difficulty in knowing how to deal with the larger political consequences of Watergate.

The point is that there probably never can be conclusive answers to such questions. With or without executive privilege, we are likely to be as frustrated as the characters in "Rashomon" in learning the absolute truth of what Richard Nixon knew and did.

But the suspicions will remain. Anyone with knowledge of Washington will find it hard to believe that a man as experienced as this President took from June 17, 1972, to April 17, 1973, to discover that Watergate involved serious official wrongdoing.

We are admonished not to follow McCarthy tactics and jump from hearsay premises to guilty conclusions. Helen Gahagan Douglas and Jerry Voorhis may find some irony in that advice, but it is fair enough. In terms of hard evidence, no outsider can prove today that the President was involved in the original crimes or their subsequent concealment.

That is a wise caution, but it does not relieve the political dilemma of Watergate. For Presidents are judged by broader standards than personal guilt. They are responsible for the character of their associates and for

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what is done in the name of the White House. And in those terms there is ample basis for the deepest concern.

Consider what is known, even at this early stage of the search for truth.

A former member of the White House staff has admitted directing the burglary of the psychiatric files of a defendant in a pending criminal case, Daniel Ellsberg. The help of the Central Intelligence Agency was obtained for that operation—in direct violation of law.

The chief domestic adviser to the President met twice with the judge presiding over the Ellsberg case, while it was going on, to offer him the directorship of the F.B.I.

Another White House staff member sent one of the Watergate criminals over to the State Department to copy past diplomatic cables and fake one involving President Kennedy in the death of Ngo Dinh Diem.

The President's former counsel gave the evidence of that fake cable to the director of the F.B.I. for destruction.

Numerous other White House men and campaign officials were involved. And the handful of incidents recalled here do not begin to convey the gravity of what was done. The effort was to destroy the political opposition, pervert the election laws, funnel money and power into centralized hands. Stewart Alsop in Newsweek says Watergate was "an attempt to alter the very nature of the ancient American political system." I would add: and the system of law.

Those are the political dimensions of Watergate. The very best that President Nixon can offer in extenuation is a plea of ignorance. That could be enough to permit his survival in office, but it would not repair the damage to American institutions.

Authority is what ultimately is at stake—the sense of authority in American society, and its exercise at home and abroad. For even overseas the poison of Watergate is having its effect.

Heads of government are not usually finicky about the morals of other powers. Leonid Brezhnev and Georges Pompidou have not lived only with saints. But when they deal with an American President, they want to know that he speaks with authority: that he can bring Congress along on a trade agreement or a security treaty.

In the bewildering daily drama of Watergate, Americans have only begun to consider the effects on their society, and therefore on the world.