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Watergate: The Way It Looked a Year Ago . . .

Mission Incredible

"As always, should you or any of your force be caught or killed, the Secretary will disavow any knowledge of your actions. This tape will self-destruct in five seconds . . . good luck . . ."

—From the CBS-TV show, *Mission Impossible*

As an example of life imitating art—of a sort—we have not for some time seen anything like the Watergate caper now unfolding in weird and scarcely believable detail, right down to the taped locks, the rubber gloves, the tear gas pens, the array of electronic equipment, and the crisp new hundred-dollar bills in the hands of the five men who stole into Democratic Party headquarters the other night under cover of darkness and something less than impenetrable aliases. *Mission Impossible* it wasn't; experts in these matters all agree that the job was bungled at almost every step of the way. *Mission Incredible* it certainly is, both in terms of execution and, more important, in terms of the motives that could conceivably have prompted so crude an escapade by such a motley crew of former Central Intelligence Agency operatives and Miami-based anti-Castro activists.

Ronald L. Ziegler, the White House spokesman, has already dismissed it as a "third-rate burglary attempt" and warned that "certain elements may try to stretch this beyond what it is." The implication of that last statement is that he knows what it is; if so, we wish he would tell us, because frankly it doesn't shape up as your ordinary, garden variety burglary—however "third-rate" its execution. An attempt to implant electronic surveillances in the headquarters of a major political party strikes us as something much more resembling what the Democratic National Chairman, Lawrence O'Brien, has called an "act of political espionage." And that, for all its comic, melodramatic aspects, is not quite so easy to dismiss.

In fact, without wishing to stretch things one bit beyond the demonstrable facts, there are certain elements here which could raise questions in even the least suspicious or skeptical minds. This is, for example, an election year, and while it is possible to sup-

pose that this deed was done by a foreign government or even some extra-terrestrial interests, the finger naturally points, in a time of intense and developing political combat, to the Democrats' principal and natural antagonist; that is to say, it points to somebody associated with or at least sympathetic to—we may as well be blunt about it—the Republicans.

We do not so allege; we merely note that this is what some people are going to be saying, or thinking, and that their speculations, dark as they may sound, are going to be encouraged by word of various connections between several of the suspects and one part or another of the Republican power structure. For example, James W. McCord, one of the five men arrested, has worked on security problems both for the Republican National Committee and the Committee for the Re-election of the President. Two of the group had in their personal effects the address of a Mr. Howard E. Hunt, another former CIA agent, who serves as a consultant to White House consultant Charles W. Colson. Other more tenuous links have been developed between the arrested suspects and elements of the Republican Party.

John Mitchell, the former Attorney General who is heading the committee for Mr. Nixon's re-election, has stoutly denied any knowledge of the affair as has the Chairman of the Republican National Committee, Senator Dole, as well as Ziegler. So life has imitated art up to a point; the "force" has been "caught"; "the Secretary" has "disavowed any knowledge" of its actions. What remains now to be seen—what is, in short, the crucial question in a time of waning confidence in the processes of government—is whether a Republican administration can bring itself to use every means at its command to prosecute perpetrators of the Watergate raid. From the sound of it, there would seem to be an abundance of evidence in the captured equipment and freshly minted currency. It ought not to be left to the Democrats to dig into *Mission Incredible* by pressing a civil suit. In short, this particular tape ought not to be allowed to self-destruct.