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When Should Mr. Nixon Have Spoken Out?

At some point, his friends and foes alike agree, President Nixon should have made a clean breast of the errors, misjudgments and crimes that were to become known as Watergate.

His principal mistake, we keep telling each other, was trying to hide the thing, to cover it up. Far better to have gone before the American people and told everything.

It seems such a reasonable thing to say until you ask the obvious question: *When?* At what point in time, as they say, could the President reasonably have been expected to come forward and tell us candidly what he knew about Watergate?

A few days after the June 17, 1972, break-in, perhaps? Assume (1) that the President had no prior knowledge that the break-in would be attempted and (2) that, through John Mitchell and other intimates and advisers, he learned shortly afterward that some big names in the Committee for the Re-election of the President and perhaps even in the White House itself were involved in Watergate-type plans and activities.

Would it have made sense for him to acknowledge such implications at the time? Certainly not from the point of view of amoral practicality.

There was an election campaign under way, a campaign in which the Democrats were hurting for a viable issue. Nixon looked like a sure winner, and it would have been politically silly to risk blowing the whole thing with some unctuous confession of high-level immorality.

Better to sit back and see what might develop. And what did develop? Seven people were arrested, and America seemed to be buying the notion that Watergate was nothing more than a "third-rate burglary" from which the opposition hoped to make some political hay.

Common sense, then, would have dictated pretty much the course the administration actually took—let it appear that the Hunts, Liddys and McCords were independent zealots whose misguided zeal was an embarrassment to the people who were running the Nixon campaign.

It certainly would have made sense to try that until the election was safely over. That's what happened.

But once the election was over, and the President re-elected in a landslide, could you really expect him to spill the beans? To make a clean breast just after the election would be tantamount to saying his silence up to that point had unfairly handicapped his opponent. Why mess up the euphoria of the landslide victory, particularly when press had pretty much forgotten about Watergate.

Everybody, that is, except The Washington Post's Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward.

It's easy to forget, but during the fall and winter, when Bernstein and Woodward were droning along, they were droning alone. The press as a whole was ignoring the story, ignoring even what The Post's reporters were digging up. The syndicated columnists who are so full of Watergate now were into other things then. The Post was more than slightly suspected of a per-

sonal vendetta, and its campaign was more an embarrassment than the shining beacon it was to become "with hindsight."

Under the circumstances, what idiot in the administration would have proposed coming clean on Watergate?

Seven people had been indicted, and there was every reason to believe that they would plead guilty, keep their mouths shut, and wait for their well-placed sponsors to spring them.

But the circumstances changed. Judge John J. Sirica changed them with his refusal to play along. He let it be known that the seven faced dreadfully long sentences unless they agreed to sing a little.

James McCord became practically operative in a letter to Judge Sirica. And a few weeks later, on April 17, President Nixon told us:

"On March 21, as a result of serious charges which came to my attention,

"America seemed to be buying the notion that Watergate was nothing more than a 'third-rate burglary' from which the opposition hoped to make some political hay."

some of which were publicly reported, I began intensive new inquiries into this whole matter."

March 21 was the day McCord lifted his voice in song.

So at long last came a time when it would have made sense for the President to make a clean breast. But by then, it was too late to do so without also admitting his role in 10 months of cover-up.

He apparently decided instead to try to gauge how much we would find out anyway, and then admit to only just that much.

Naturally, we thought that was a terrible way to handle it. He should have made a clean breast, we kept saying, without ever asking: *When?*

Even now all kinds of well-meaning people are saying that they could forgive Richard Nixon if even at this late date he came forward and told us all he knows.

Those well-meaning people are lying. It's like a banker saying, "Confess that you've been embezzling for four years and you can go on being head teller." Let Nixon tell what we think he knows, and we'll demand his head on a platter. We'll have to.

The truth is that a Richard Nixon as involved in the Watergate cover-up as most Americans believe him to be cannot make a clean breast without at the same time tendering his resignation.

And with the current troubles of Vice President Agnew, that prospect is not nearly as appealing as it used to be.