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Surgery for 'Watergate Cancer'

"I feel like a cancer surgeon." Ron Ziegler said after announcing the latest changes in the White House staff and the Cabinet. And that unguarded comment by the White House press secretary announces the decisive feature of the President's approach to Watergate.

Mr. Nixon and his men still have not got it through their heads that they are part of the cancer. In consequence, all the moves the President has so far taken to rebuild the administration are inadequate.

The basic fact is that Watergate, in sharp contrast to the arguments being advanced by both the President and Vice President Spiro Agnew, is very, very different from past scandals. What sets Watergate apart is the element of selfless dedication. Ehrlichman and Dean and Hunt and Liddy and the other Watergate villains did not do what they did to line their pockets after the fashion of the heavies in such affairs as Teapot Dome.

On the contrary, they acted out of loyalty to Mr. Nixon. In the interest of helping him a little they dragged into the shabbiest campaign practices institutions traditionally held above politics. They prostituted the courts, the FBI, the State Department and the CIA.

The only proof against that kind of abuse lies in the caliber and quality of the men around the President. Devotion to an individual over an institu-

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tion has to be rooted out. The Jeffersonian principle of sturdy individualism which Mr. Nixon has used against that weakling, the social services, needs instead to be turned against that true powerhouse, the presidency.

The White House staff, of course, is a first candidate for change. It makes sense to bring in at the very top a man of stature and independence who can stand up to presidential pressure — a man like John Connally. But not Connally himself in the ambiguous position of unpaid, part-time adviser.

For with all due respect to a man I admire, Connally has a potent ambition to be President — a job he can only get from Mr. Nixon. He has a wide range of corporate interests in matters — including oil and gas and cattle and real estate and banking and aviation — intimately affected by presidential decisions. So, far from being a guarantee of an independent White House, the designation of Connally

only raises a new conflict-of-interest problem.

The second big candidate for regeneration is the Cabinet. Mr. Nixon, to be sure, has taken one important step in that direction by making James Schlesinger, the strong-minded former head of the CIA, Secretary of Defense. But even the Schlesinger appointment is part of a reshuffle of familiar faces, not an accession of independence from the outside.

Moreover, it is very hard to believe that Mr. Schlesinger's replacement at the CIA, William Colby, can follow through with basic reform of the agency. Colby, after all, is part of the old-boy network at the CIA. His appointment only underlines the question of why an outsider was not brought in.

The other important replacement at the top, Elliott Richardson, who left the Pentagon to become attorney general-designate, is already giving a good

example of how entangling past connections with the White House can be. Richardson has been lawyer-like in the extreme, as distinct from straightforward, in addressing himself to the question of whether President Nixon wanted to keep from the Pentagon Papers trial the information relating to the burglary of Daniel Ellsberg's analyst by operators working under White House order.

He admits that a vital witness, former White House aide Bud Krogh, had the impression Mr. Nixon wanted the information suppressed. But Richardson never asked Krogh where he got that impression. Well, why didn't Richardson ask Krogh? The suspicion has to be that he didn't want to know.

Moreover, the Cabinet refurbishment also has to go much further. A second look needs to be taken at several of the secretaries and not a few of the under secretaries. And with all due respect for the attractive personal qualities of William Rogers, it's not illegitimate to ask why the Secretary of State should be so ignorant of foreign affairs.

For all the motions and the talk, in sum, Mr. Nixon has not yet begun the kind of surgery that Watergate truly requires. He and his men are still covering up and the only thing left to cover up is hard evidence that Mr. Nixon himself knew what was being done in his name.