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By JACK ANDERSON



WASHINGTON — The question hangs heavily over the Watergate horror. How deeply is President Nixon implicated in the crimes of his subordinates?

The answer is known, of course, only to a few White House insiders who are disposed to protect the President. Nevertheless, we have sought them out and have asked hard questions.

Those privy to the oval office recall that the President was totally absorbed with foreign affairs during the Watergate gestation. He has a strong sense of presidential priorities, they say. He doesn't like to be distracted by minor matters when he is concentrating on a major problem.

While G. Gordon Liddy was plotting the Watergate break-in and bugging in Attorney General John Mitchell's offices in early February 1972, the President was preparing for his Peking trip. He returned home on February 28.

Two days later, the North Vietnamese struck with their surprise spring offensive. The President was wholly occupied with the military crisis in Vietnam throughout April while the Waterbuggers were recruited and equipped.

On May 8, he mined Haiphong harbor, an act which he feared might cause the cancellation of his Moscow visit. This crowded out all other problems, aides recall, as he awaited the Kremlin's reaction and prepared for the summit meeting. He arrived in Moscow on May 22 as the Waterbuggers were reconnoitering the Democratic layout in preparation for the first break-in.

Throughout this period, say aides, subordinates didn't bother him about politics. He usually holed up with his Vietnam-China-Russia paperwork in one of his hideouts. An occasional political poll, memo or clipping would reach his desk, they remember. Usually, it would come back with a scribbled "H," referring it to staff chief H. R. Haldeman. Some were marked both "H" and "C," which meant it should also be called to the attention of troubleshooter Charles Colson.

Everyone who had access to the President remembers he was angry and surprised by news of the Watergate arrest on June 17. He exploded with expletives, they recall. The kindest word he had for those responsible was "idiots!"

He immediately assigned counsel John Dean, then a presidential favorite, to find out whether anyone in the White House was involved. Aides who heard the President discuss this assignment swear he wanted Dean to make sure the White House was clean; not to obstruct the investigation.

The President was more suspicious but less concerned about the campaign committee across the street at 1701 Pennsylvania Avenue. "It was assumed around the White House," recalls one insider, "that

Watergate was strictly a Keystone Kops, 1701 type operation."

The suspicion centered on Jeb Stuart Magruder, the deputy campaign director. Two months before the election, John Ehrlichman urged that Magruder be fingered as the campaign official who authorized the Waterbugging. The decision not to throw Magruder to the wolves, says one source, had the President's approval.

Congressional sources also say that L. Patrick Gray, as acting

FBI director, warned the President as early as July 6 that the men around him were misusing both the FBI and CIA. "You are being mortally wounded by the men around you," Gray is quoted as telling the President.

Richard Nixon places a high premium on loyalty, which he believes in giving as well as receiving. The men around him, indeed, were selected more for their loyalty than their ability.

It simply didn't occur to the president, in the opinion of those who know him, that such trusted aides as Haldeman and Ehrlichman would deceive him.

Of course, no one knows what Haldeman or Ehrlichman may have told the President in private. But there was never any hint around the White House, say our sources, that Nixon had any inkling of the payoffs to defendants to keep their mouths shut, the destruction of incriminating evidence and the obstruction of justice.

Certainly, he wanted to control the Watergate investigation and keep it from becoming a major embarrassment. He may even have congratulated Dean for helping to soften the blow, although a search of his meticulous records doesn't show the September 17 visit when Dean reputedly claimed the president told him: "Good job, John. Bob (Haldeman) told me what a great job you've done."

But our sources are convinced that Dean, Mitchell, Ehrlichman and Haldeman concealed from the President their alleged involvement in the illegal cover-up.

Despite his grim, brooding nature, Nixon also has a gentle, compassionate Quaker side. One aide told us that after his name appeared briefly in the Watergate headlines, the President called him in not to demand an explanation but to console him. For an hour, Nixon told about the rough times he had been through and urged his assistant to relax and not let the notoriety get him down.

It is painful for the President to fire anyone, least of all a close associate. He went through several sleepless nights, say aides, before he could bring himself to oust Haldeman and Ehrlichman. After the confrontation, they heard, the emotion welled up in his eyes.

The President's involvement in the spying-sabotage operation, however, was less innocent. We'll report on this in a future column.