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The Watergate Whitewash

THE "WATERGATE AFFAIR" is rapidly becoming as famous, or notorious, as the Teapot Dome scandal of the early 1920s. Not in 50 years has an incident so seriously raised questions about an administration's undercover relations with its financial angels.

Looking back on the government's sellout to the oil interests that made Teapot Dome a household word of its time, it is well to remember now that the full story of bribery and corruption would probably never have been exposed except that an aroused public demanded and got an independent investigation that the Harding administration could not afford to make of itself.

When the late Thomas J. Walsh, the crusading senator from Montana, got through with his relentless public inquiry, the Harding administration was a shambles, and President Warren G. Harding himself soon collapsed and died. One reason that administration would never have made a true investigation of its own was that the then-attorney general himself was corrupt.

Today, the demand is growing, almost daily, for the appointment of another

independent prosecutor to unravel the many mysterious and suspicious angles of the Watergate affair. Like the early stages of Teapot Dome, the Watergate puzzle has up to now emerged in such strange bits and pieces that only a full-fledged investigation, backed with subpoena power to make reluctant witnesses talk, can put it all together.

IT IS DIFFICULT for even the most diligent reader to keep up with the developments. The five-man raid on the Watergate offices of the Democratic National Committee was at first thought to be an effort at planting secret listening devices on the premises. Now it appears that the invaders were intent on removing bugs already put in place.

It also has been established that the arrested raiders were connected in various ways with the White House and the Committee to Re-Elect the President, which, at the time of the raid, was headed by former Attorney General John Mitchell. The White House figures who have been named have refused to talk. Mr. Mitchell has resigned

(presumably for other reasons), as has the re-election committee's general counsel. Its finance counsel, who handled some of the "hot" moneys, has been fired.

The Watergate arrests, meanwhile, have led to fresh exposures of the secret Nixon campaign fund, which includes \$10 million that the President refuses to account for. The General Accounting Office, after a limited probe, has accused Mr. Nixon's fund-raisers of violating the new law on campaign contributions:

Since the GAO has no subpoena power, however, it has referred the case to the Justice Department for further investigation, and there it rests. Is it likely that Attorney General Richard Kleindienst will put his boss, the President, on the spot, or otherwise jeopardize the re-election of an administration on which his own job depends?

Protests of innocence flow almost daily from the White House, from former Commerce Secretary Maurice Stans (the chief fund-raiser) and from Clark MacGregor, who succeeded Mitchell as head of Mr. Nixon's re-election committee. But the only way public confidence can be restored is for the Presi-

dent to name an independent prosecutor and authorize an uninhibited investigation instead of a whitewash.

THE NEW FEDERAL law requiring full disclosure of campaign contributions is based on the sound proposition that the public has the right to know the identity of big benefactors that candidates are indebted to. For example, the Watergate affair turned up a hidden cash contribution of \$25,000 to the Nixon fund. The donor, who wanted it kept secret, has since been given an invaluable federal bank charter.

Mr. Kleindienst says the appointment of a special prosecutor is "impossible." Why? There are many trusted public figures outside the government who could be sworn in tomorrow as a special assistant attorney general to head up the inquiry.

"Who are you going to substitute for the FBI?" asks Mr. Kleindienst. That is no problem, for the FBI can be trusted to get the evidence. The problem is what happens to the evidence after the FBI turns it over to Mr. Nixon's men in the Justice Department.

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