

An Appeal, A Growing Exodus

WASHINGTON—One of the most extraordinary weeks in the history of American government began with president Richard M. Nixon accepting the resignations of four high and trusted aides, absolving himself of any personal blame while accepting hierarchical "responsibility" for the Watergate scandal, and imploring the country to turn its attention to other issues. It ended with a fresh burst of revelations that tied the core of Mr. Nixon's Administration to a campaign of political destructiveness and illegality more grotesque than Watergate itself—and magnified disturbing, unanswered questions about the Chief Executive's own conduct.

What a Presidential spokesman had once described as a "third-rate burglary" had become — despite Mr. Nixon's grudging retreat before advancing investigators over a period of months, and his exertions on television last week—a case of near-crisis proportions.

"It is essential," the President said in his speech Monday night, "that we not be so distracted by events such as this that we neglect the vital work before us, before this nation, before America at a time of critical importance to America and the world."

Mr. Nixon might just as well have asked the Mississippi to flow northward. Each day after his speech brought new evidence that Watergate, and whatever else it may come to symbolize, would not easily be diverted from the public consciousness or, for that matter, the President's. Among the major developments were these:

- John W. Dean 3d, fired by Mr. Nixon as his White House counsel not long after Mr. Dean said he would not be made a "scapegoat," turned over to a Federal judge in Washington two keys to a safe deposit box in which, Mr. Dean said, there was documentary evidence—of an unspecified nature—about Watergate. If that is true, the documents will be rarities: There were disclosures last week that documents had been destroyed in several Washington offices; and at the White House, the Federal Bureau of Investigation was physically guarding the remaining files of two former Nixon aides.

- Government investigators told The New York Times they now had

enough evidence to indict six former Administration officials for conspiring to obstruct justice with a careful cover story about the June, 1972, Watergate break-in.

- The investigators also claimed to have evidence suggesting that Watergate was only part of a detailed and considerably larger plan of political sabotage and espionage, undertaken as early as 1971 and designed to influence the selection of Mr. Nixon's Democratic opponent in the Presidential election last year. On Friday, a Federal grand jury in Florida indicted Donald H. Segretti, a Nixon campaign worker, on a charge of mailing a fictitious letter on Senator Edmund Muskie's stationery during the Florida primary. The letter—denounced at the time by Mr. Muskie, who lost badly in the primary—accused two of his rivals for the nomination, Senators Hubert Humphrey and Henry Jackson, of sexual misconduct.

A Try at Rebuilding

The composite picture, still clearly far from complete, was a damning one, and Mr. Nixon took what steps he could. There was a growing significant exodus from government. H. R. Haldeman, his chief of staff, and John D. Ehrlichman, his domestic affairs adviser, resigned with Mr. Nixon's public expression of regret; Mr. Dean was told he had resigned; the Attorney General, Richard Kleindienst, resigned because, he said, of his past association with many figures in the scandal—in which he himself has not been implicated; Egil Krogh Jr., a former White House aide, took a sudden leave of absence, and David Young, another former aide, resigned. And only days before, Mr. Nixon's acting head of the F.B.I., L. Patrick Gray 3d, had resigned after admitting he destroyed two files in the case.

Mr. Nixon made a start at rebuilding even as the disintegration went on. He transferred Elliot Richardson from the Defense Department to the Justice Department, put William

Ruckelshaus in charge of the F.B.I. temporarily, and named Leonard Garment, a liberal and old friend, to be White House counsel in Mr. Dean's place.

But the President's problem was underlined by his use of Mr. Richardson: Justice was his third Cabinet job in a few months, an implicit statement by the President that when he looks for help, he keeps seeing the same few faces. The problem was plain, too, in his designation of Gen. Alexander Haig, a former deputy to Henry A. Kissinger, to take over Mr. Haldeman's function.

Messrs. Haldeman and Ehrlichman

built and dominated the White House staff, and despite General Haig's appointment, their departure left the White House staff essentially rudderless, since most of those who remained behind (not to mention a good many who joined the exodus) were their creatures.

While Mr. Nixon praised Messrs. Haldeman and Ehrlichman as they departed, Mr. Dean was a different case altogether—and Mr. Nixon treated him accordingly. The President said simply, "John Dean has also resigned." Mr. Dean at one time had the President's total trust: He was the man named by Mr. Nixon to conduct the first White House investigation of the Watergate case, an investigation cited by the President during the campaign as proof that no one "presently employed" on the White House staff had been involved.

A few weeks ago, however, Mr. Dean was reportedly named in grand jury testimony as one of several Nixon associates who had actually planned the bugging and burglary at Democratic headquarters that he was "investigating." He promptly replied publicly with his implied but clear

threat to tell what he knew. His rejection of "scapegoat" status provoked a bewildering series of reactions from the White House: a thinly veiled denunciation by Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler, then a solicitous phone call from President Nixon on Easter Sunday ("You are still my counsel," the President said), followed by the abrupt dismissal. If the still unexplained phone call was meant to mollify Mr. Dean and thus silence him, as some have claimed, it clearly did neither.

In addition to his staff changes, Mr. Nixon tried, in a variety of ways, to take the offensive with his Monday night speech to the nation. He accepted "responsibility" for Watergate but spent the bulk of his time testifying to his innocence and shifting the burden of guilt to his subordinates ("people whose zeal exceeded their judgment"); to the pressing duties of his office (for the first time in his life, he said, he had been too busy to pay attention to the mechanics of his campaign); and to the political process itself, which he said must share the blame for "excesses" such as Watergate.

He named Mr. Richardson to conduct a thorough investigation, and said Mr. Richardson would decide if he needed an independent prosecutor. He reverted to patriotic themes ("God Bless America," he concluded, "and God bless every one of you"). And he urged the country to embark with him on the "vital work" of securing peace abroad and prosperity without

inflation at home.

In the days following his speech, Mr. Nixon seemed alone in taking his advice. In a determined effort to conduct the business of the Presidency as if Watergate did not exist, he dispatched Henry Kissinger to Moscow, welcomed West German Chan-

cellor Willy Brandt to the White House, surfaced his foreign aid bill, unveiled a tax reform plan, and asked for new controls on corporate price boosts.

A Cover-up Plot

For others in the Administration—including Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Ehrlichman—life became more complex. On the day after Mr. Nixon's speech, government investigators told The Times that, along with John N. Mitchell, the former Attorney General, and three others, Mr. Dean and two campaign officials, Jeb Stuart Magruder and Frederick C. Larue, Messrs. Haldeman and Ehrlichman had conspired to cover up the truth about Watergate.

In essence, investigators said, everyone involved in the operation repeatedly lied to Federal investigators, prosecutors, the press, their colleagues and, finally, the President himself. The scheme was also said to have provided for payments to silence the arrested Watergate defendants, as well as a bogus story designed to make reports of huge cash outlays to Gordon Liddy, a convicted Watergate conspirator, more plausible to the public. Mr. Mitchell quickly denied the story; Mr. Ehrlichman and Mr. Halde-

man, saying little and radiating confidence, went off to testify in private before the grand jury and a special Senate investigating committee.

A Sordid Strategy

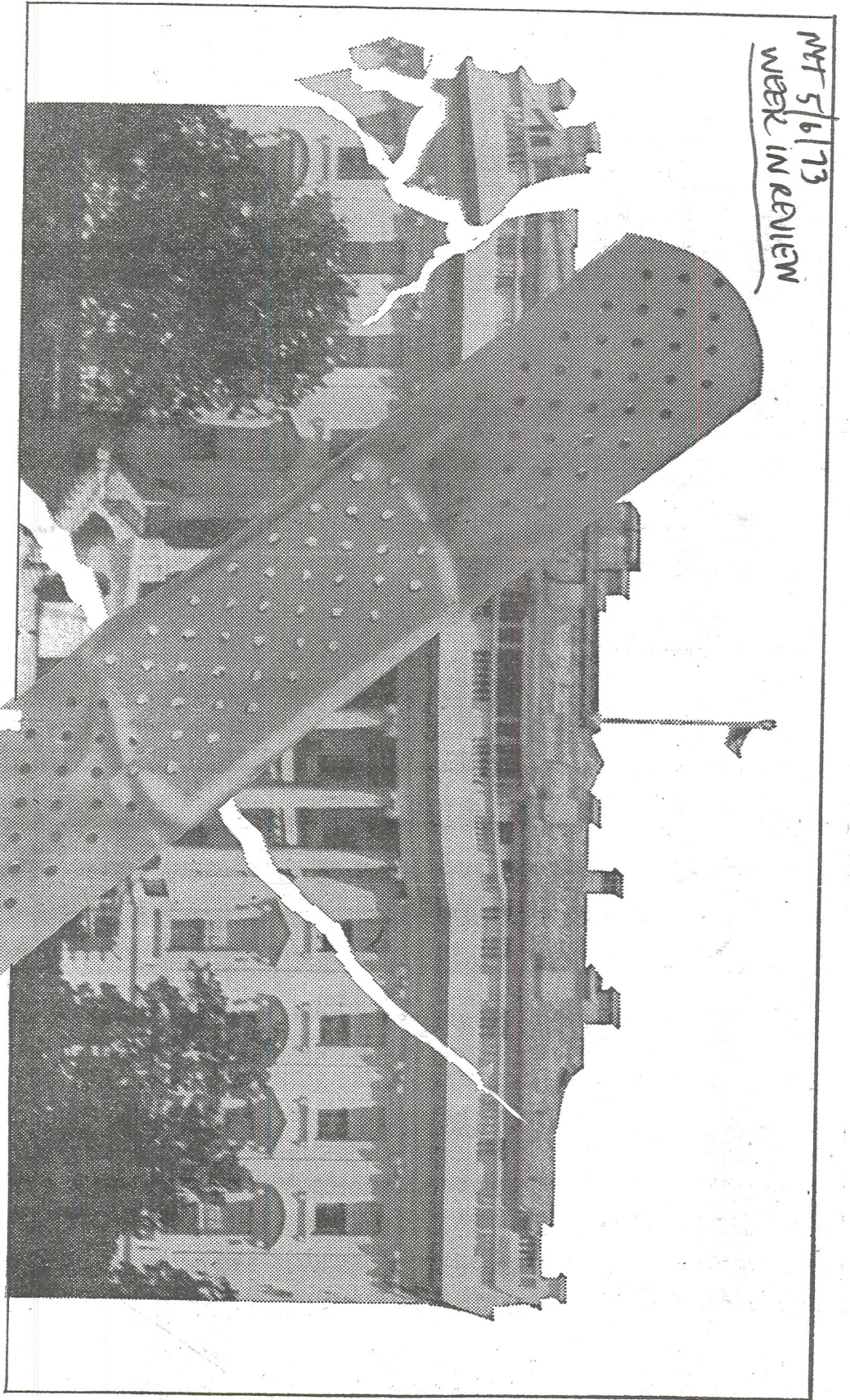
The next day, investigators told The Times yet another story which, though it won smaller headlines, may yet prove more devastating: namely, that Watergate was merely the tip of the iceberg, an awkward stepchild of an otherwise smoothly concerted, broad—and expensive—campaign of political espionage. The campaign, according to the investigators' account, was conceived in 1971 when Mr. Nixon was running behind Senator Muskie in the preferential polls, was directed by Mr. Haldeman, and was applied with a vengeance in the Democratic primaries of 1972.

Like Watergate, the espionage campaign was aimed ultimately at insuring Mr. Nixon's eventual re-election; unlike Watergate, however—the motives for which have never been satisfactorily explained—the sabotage campaign was aimed at knocking off Mr. Nixon's stronger opponents, principally Mr. Muskie, and thus insuring the nomination of the man whom all the G.O.P. strategists thought they could beat, George McGovern.

According to the account, the operative agent in the disruption campaign was Donald Segretti, recruited for the task by Dwight Chapin, a Haldeman protégé who was linked with Mr. Segretti in newspaper accounts last year and who has since left the White House. Mr. Segretti was, according to this account, financed with funds channeled through Herbert W. Kalmbach, Mr. Nixon's personal attorney on the West Coast.

The investigators' account seemed to explain a series of previously inex-

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plicable incidents that bedeviled the Muskie campaign.

But most fascinating to close students of the scandal was the investigators' assertion that by early 1972, Mr. Segretti's operations had fallen under the direct control of Liddy and Howard Hunt, both later convicted for the Watergate bugging.

Even now, it is an article of faith among Mr. Nixon's remaining aides in the White House that the Hunt-Liddy Watergate operation and the Segretti disruption campaign were two different things. The first was serious and illegal business; the second, mere political pranks. If the investigators' account is true, however, the two operations were not only linked but, beyond that, the offspring of a deliberate, multifaceted effort.

A Glut of Investigators

The casualty list extended beyond government. In addition to the departures of Messrs. Ehrlichman, Halde- man, Dean, et al, the White House also disclosed that Mr. Kalmbach was no longer handling business for Mr. Nixon.

Nor was there any lessening in the pressures on the Administration. Although Mr. Nixon had conferred on Mr. Richardson discretionary authority to appoint a special prosecutor, a growing number of Senators, including such conservative stalwarts as Barry Goldwater, urged the new Attorney General to use that authority to insure an investigation independent of White House influence.

The investigative field is already crowded with contestants. In Washington, the grand jury proceeded with its investigation while the special Senate subcommittee, under the chairmanship of Sam J. Ervin Jr. of North Carolina, took private testimony and prepared to open hearings of its own on May 15.

And in New York, a Federal grand jury continued to press its inquiries into whether Robert Vesco, a New Jersey financier who secretly donated \$200,000 to the Nixon campaign, received any special favors in return in connection with a government investigation into alleged stockmarket violations. That question has yet to be settled but on Friday, the Justice Department, on the strength of a separate investigation by the General

Accounting Office of Republican fund-raising efforts, charged the Nixon re-election committee with failing to report and maintain records on Mr. Vesco's \$200,000 contribution. Republican fund-raisers admitted during the week that they had destroyed the records of between \$1-million and \$2-million in contributions because they said, they had promised anonymity to the donors.

A Lingering Question

It is almost certain that there will be new revelations. The question now is whether they will eventually touch the President himself.

The new guidelines issued by the White House governing the use of executive privilege would seem, on their fact, to inhibit any Presidential aide who wished to link the President to the activities of his political lieutenants—assuming, of course, that he had the information to do so. In effect, the guidelines require past or present White House staff members to invoke executive privilege in connection with all communications, verbal or written, with Mr. Nixon.

Moreover, even Mr. Nixon's enemies appear to have adopted an attitude of prayerful expectation that the President will not be linked directly and personally to Watergate or any of its manifestations. Occasional references to impeachment have been silenced as premature, though the subject is openly raised. Senator Goldwater, for instance, said he believes President Nixon had no personal knowledge of either the Watergate bugging or its cover-up. But he said that "if it is shown he was in on it, there is no question there would be impeachment proceedings. That office has to be kept clean and I don't give a damn what it takes to keep it clean."

There were many here who continued to ask—if only privately—how Mr. Nixon could have failed to discover the full implications of the Watergate burglary earlier than he says he did. These questions arose from the belief that Mr. Nixon, a meticulous man, must have been much more aware of the activities of his subordinates than he suggested in his speech Monday night. But these are beliefs only. If the President was involved, either before or after the Watergate break-in, that has not been demonstrated. But the fact that the question exists is a measure of the President's problem.

—ROBERT B. SEMPLE Jr.