

Spirit of Watergate ^{NWT} 8/5/73

Important as it is to determine exactly who was guilty of what wrongdoing in the Watergate scandals, Watergate's true significance concerns more than an episode of political espionage and burglary. The deeper issues go to the heart of the American people's relations with their government. The spirit of Watergate has permeated the atmosphere of the White House in which governmental power is wielded.

The Senate hearings, though still inconclusive on many details, have already demonstrated beyond doubt that the Administration viewed itself as an embattled enclave threatened by sinister adversaries bent on violence and subversion. President Nixon and his top advisers translated every expression of dissent and protest into proof of horrendous conspiracies, supported and financed by foreign enemies. In that distorted light potential hecklers and demonstrators appeared not as nuisances to be held accountable under the laws for any disruption, but as an enemy army to be sought out and destroyed with the full arsenal of counterinsurgency weapons normally reserved for warfare against a foreign enemy. This is not conjecture. It is the picture openly painted by Messrs. Ehrlichman and Haldeman.

The President's palace guard feared every potential Democratic candidate, not as a challenger under the rules of the two party system, but as a usurper of the power that had to belong to Richard Nixon for the nation's salvation. This, too, is not conjecture. John Mitchell testified that he would have gone to virtually any length in keeping the lid on the festering scandals as long as he thought Mr. Nixon's re-election required it.

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Where fear is chronic, such terms as right and wrong, moral and immoral, legal and illegal lose their meaning. Convinced that the Administration and the republic for which it stands were in mortal danger, the President's surrogates felt themselves empowered—indeed, duty bound—to take whatever action they deemed necessary to protect the national security as they saw it. In that climate, breaking into the office of a political

enemy's psychiatrist is, as Mr. Ehrlichman emphasized, an act of national defense. Asked whether the President might claim the right to order murder as well as burglary in the interest of national security, Mr. Ehrlichman declined to draw any firm line.

In such an atmosphere of constant and imminent danger, it ceases to be surprising that the President resorts to the secret taping of all his conversations—or that he considers himself and his designees the sole qualified judges on whether the content of those tapes corroborates or contradicts vital testimony in the investigation of political crimes. Indeed, such Presidential absolutism concerning the tapes is only pale reflection of Mr. Nixon's conviction that he alone may order American planes to bomb a neutral nation in secrecy, while assuring the American people that no such action had been taken.

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Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, who—as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—ordered and concealed the secret raids on Cambodia in 1969 at Mr. Nixon's command, saw nothing wrong with these actions because nobody "with a need to know" had been deceived. General Wheeler's explanation is more succinct than that of any Watergate witness. Whenever rulers have persuaded themselves that the security of their country requires them to do whatever they deem necessary, they act in secrecy and in disregard of all legal and constitutional restraints. The novel doctrine of divulging only what, in the master's view, the subjects need to know gives automatic sanction to secrecy and deception.

The spirit of Watergate finds expression in enshrining the President's view of the nation's security as conclusive in the application or withholding of governmental power. Incongruously, it also leaves plenty of room for selfish political calculation—like that reflected in the machinations that linked a promised campaign contribution by I.T.T. with clandestine negotiations to kill antitrust proceedings against that company.

The real constitutional crisis will not be resolved and the nation's future as a free, self-governing society assured until the American people comprehend and reject the doctrine of an all-knowing White House, empowered to act in disregard of the Constitution and the laws.