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Nixon's Versions Of Watergate

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PRESIDENT NIXON'S latest Watergate statement sets forth his third version of the affair. His present position can be fairly judged only against the background of previous positions, taken and then abandoned.

The first Nixon version of Watergate dismissed it as a petty affair confined to the men who broke into Democratic Headquarters. In press conferences, President Nixon cited investigations of Watergate made by his White House counsel, John Dean, and the FBI under acting director L. Patrick Gray. Mr. Nixon said that he was "sure that no member of the White House staff . . . had anything to do with this kind of reprehensible activity."

That position had to be abandoned after the men charged in the Watergate break-in were found guilty. One of them, James McCord, cracked under the threat of a stiff sentence. In late March, McCord claimed that high administration officials were involved both in authorizing the Watergate break-in and in trying to cover it up.

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THE SECOND Nixon version of Watergate was put forward in a statement read by the president on April 17. The thrust of the second version was that Mr. Nixon had discovered new evidence which led him to believe that he had been deceived by the original investigators.

Mr. Nixon then dropped Messrs. Gray and Dean. He accepted with regret resignations of two other friends — H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman — who had been implicated in charges made by Dean and Gray. But Mr. Nixon insisted that he himself was totally clean.

That second Nixon position was wiped out by developments set in motion when the Watergate case was crossed with the trial of Dan Ellsberg in the Pentagon Papers case. It became known that some of the Watergate burglars, acting under White House orders with equipment furnished by the CIA, had burglarized the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist.

That development brought the CIA into the picture. In congressional testimony, former director Richard Helms and General Vernon Walters, the deputy director, swore they had been pressured by Haldeman and Ehrlichman to protect the Watergate burglars by giving them cover as part of a CIA operation.

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MR. NIXON'S latest position builds a barrier against the implications of the CIA testimony. Mr. Nixon claims that he was, for reasons of "national security," very concerned by leaks which began early in his administration. To prevent the leaks he set up a number of special intelligence units linking the White House, the CIA and the Internal Security Division of the Justice Department. He also authorized certain wiretapping and burglary operations.

The trouble with all this is obvious. Instead of setting forth a straightforward position at the outset, Mr. Nixon has been furiously chopping and changing as developments require. He extends a very cloudy "national security" blanket over a wide range of activities, many of which seem quite political in character, without giving any details.

The question about Mr. Nixon now is: how guilty?