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The Watergate And the White House...

A flurry of developments has suddenly transformed the Watergate affair from a sideshow to a political bomb that could blow the Nixon administration apart. For the first time suspicion is beginning to gather around the one person almost everybody hoped was not involved—Richard Nixon.

At the outset, to be sure, Watergate seemed pure nuttiness—half-a-dozen dubious characters caught in the act of breaking into Democratic Party headquarters for the apparent purpose of tapping telephones. The freakish character was not much changed when it became known that two of those involved had connections with President Nixon's re-election campaign—James McCord, a former CIA employee who was security chief for the campaign committee; and E. Howard Hunt, another former CIA official who had a White House office.

The case took on a deeper character when The Washington Post disclosed that there was a general Republican fund to penetrate and sabotage the Democratic campaign effort. According to The Post, the White House chief of staff, H.R. Haldeman, and former Attorney General John Mitchell both had access to the fund. One beneficiary was said to be Donald Segretti, a California lawyer hired to undertake the sabotage mission by Mr. Haldeman's chief assistant and President Nixon's appointments secretary, Dwight Chapin.

Even so, sabotage could be laughed off as a kind of prank. The Post's charges were disparaged by Nixon Republicans as the work of liberal Democrats. But there is nothing partisan or prankish about the latest developments.

Consider first the letter sent by Mr. McCord, the security director of the Nixon campaign, as he faced sentencing by Federal Judge John Sirica for his part in the original Watergate break-in. In that letter, McCord stated flatly that "perjury occurred during the trial in matters highly material to the structure, orientation and impact of the government's case."

He said that "political pressure" had been "applied to the defendants to . . . remain silent." He said: "I cannot feel confident in talking with an FBI agent, in testifying before a Grand Jury whose U.S. attorneys work for the Department of Justice or in talking with other government representatives."

Then there is the role of John Dean III, the young lawyer who is the President's counsel. Mr. Dean was assigned by the President to investigate Watergate last summer and emerged with a report that there was no involvement by any White House staff members.

But there is now evidence that Mr. Dean himself lied to the FBI about Watergate. Acting FBI Director L. Patrick Gray testified to the Senate Committee considering his confirmation as director, that Dean told the FBI he did not know that Howard Hunt, one of those involved in the original Watergate break-in had a White House office.

In fact, Dean had earlier taken into his own possession materials in Hunt's White House office which he acquired by having the safe forced open. Moreover, according to the Los Angeles Times, McCord told Senate investigators that Dean had prior knowledge of the Watergate break-in.

Finally, there is the stand taken by President Nixon himself on testimony by White House officials before a bipartisan Senate committee set up to investigate Watergate. The committee has been eager to question Mr. Dean, and Dwight Chapin, the appointments secretary who resigned after being named in The Post stories.

But their appearance is being blocked by the doctrine of executive privilege. Normally that doctrine is used only to protect confidential advice given the President by his advisers against congressional prying. On March 12, however, the White House threw the "executive privilege" blanket over Mr. Chapin with a statement which extended the doctrine to "former" presidential aides. At his press conference of March 15, Mr.

Nixon said of Mr. Dean: "I am not going to have the Counsel to the President of the United States testify in a formal session for the Congress."

What all this means is that the issue is no longer political sabotage by low-level operators. The issue is obstruction of justice by a systematic cover-up at the highest levels. A cloud has been cast over the Justice Department and the FBI. A time honored doctrine—the doctrine of executive privilege—has been perverted.

Moreover, the finger of guilt is no longer pointing merely at persons high up in the administration. It is not merely a matter of Mr. Haldeman, or former Attorney General Mitchell. The man in the middle is now President Nixon.

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