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The President's Turn

A growing number of Republican Senators no longer share the Administration's apparent hope that public apathy will allow President Nixon to ride out the Watergate storm by pretending that the affair does not really concern him. No amount of public apathy could justify Mr. Nixon's posture of disengagement; but the Administration can no longer claim that only the news media are interested in the Watergate "caper."

It has long since become evident that the Watergate scandal was no "caper." After hearing the testimony by James W. McCord Jr., Senator Marlow W. Cook, Republican of Kentucky, said he now believed that some of the Administration's "underlings" had "really thought that it might be necessary to rig a Federal election."

Tampering with the election process of the United States is no laughing matter. However, Senator Cook may be in error when he suggests that the effort to rig the election was masterminded at the "underling" level.

Underlings were caught in the act of political espionage. Underlings were brought to trial. Underlings apparently were persuaded, like good spies, to remain silent and take the rap—until Mr. McCord broke ranks. But the evidence is now, overwhelming that the underlings were not just a gang of overzealous Nixon supporters acting on their own. The very term—underlings—implies that these men acted under instructions from more powerful quarters. It is perfectly clear that their money and their orders came from command posts very close to the center of the Administration.

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James W. Dean 3d, the President's legal counsel, has been charged by L. Patrick Gray, the acting director of the F.B.I., of lying when he denied knowing that E. Howard Hunt, one of the convicted Watergate conspirators, had operated from an office inside the White House. Yet, the same Mr. Dean still heads the "investigation" of the Watergate affair ordered by the President. The same Mr. Dean also took to himself the right to sit in on the F.B.I. interrogation of witnesses to the Watergate case.

And the same Mr. Dean continues to enjoy the President's personal protection, labeled "executive privilege," that keeps him immune from Senatorial questioning.

The President's personal lawyer, Herbert W. Kalmbach, has told the F.B.I. that he paid substantial amounts of money to Donald Segretti, another "underling" alleged to have been involved in the political espionage. Mr. Segretti, in turn, came recommended from inside the White House by Dwight L. Chapin, then the President's appointments secretary.

The money allocated to these extraordinary activities that were characterized by Senator Cook as efforts to "rig" the election came out of accounts, safes and suitcases under the direct jurisdiction of the two top campaign managers, John N. Mitchell and Maurice Stans, both former Cabinet officers and the President's close personal and political associates.

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Thus the web of the conspiracy was evidently spun by men who were the President's surrogates. The fact that it has not been charged that the President had personal knowledge of these crimes, plotted and committed in the cause of his re-election, is no longer particularly relevant. They were plotted and financed at a level of power for which the President must assume personal responsibility.

It would be a high watermark of hypocrisy for Mr. Nixon, who has made himself a spokesman for "law and order," to pretend that lawlessness within the high ranks of his Administration is of no direct concern to him personally as well as to the Office of the President.

Senate Republican Leader Hugh Scott, one of Mr. Nixon's loyal supporters, yesterday expressed his concern over these "developments which taint the political process." Senator Charles Mathias Jr., Republican of Maryland, demands a restoration of confidence. When those who have undermined that confidence are so close to the Presidency, it is clearly up to the President to take personal charge of the process of full disclosure. Nothing less can re-establish faith in the Administration and in the integrity of Government.