

Post 3/31/73

Time to Be Perfectly Clear

Washington has become a dismal swamp groping about in a miasma of suspicion and ugly rumor and only one man can now clear the air.

The White House gives the appearance of a silent, beleaguered fortress while President Nixon steadfastly defends present and former associates from charges of guilty knowledge of the bugging last year of Democratic national headquarters in the Watergate building.

The President's loyalty is admirable as a human quality—or would be in other and less grave circumstances—and his refusal to throw subordinates to the hounds of the Democratic Senate is humanly understandable. All the same, he is increasingly risking a nasty conclusion by the public that he is covering up something truly evil.

His unwillingness to order aides to testify in the Senate's investigation, on the normally sound ground that Congress has no right to pry into the inner communications of that separate branch of government which is the presidency, could be seen as a decent refusal by a commanding general to let some second lieutenant or other take the heat.

Nevertheless, he is putting at hazard here his own moral authority both as President of the United States and as the head of a national coalition that chose him for re-election in justified fear of the irresponsible alternative offered in George McGovern.

The President, in short, is running the danger of letting down too much (the welfare of the country) and too many, and especially those traditional

"Mr. Nixon is risking a nasty conclusion by the public that he is covering up something truly evil concerning the Watergate."

Democrats who went to the front for him last year in belief that by this they were going to the front for the national interest.

For though the ultimate truth in all this Watergate business is still far from clear, one thing is no longer in any doubt. This is that at least somebody somewhere in the political hierarchy adopted a policy of reckless overkill in the campaign of last year—a policy that was wholly unnecessary anyhow—and that big money was crudely used in implementing that policy.

Much that is being whispered is unprovable and may be simply false. The proposition of overkill is undentable and the President's ultimate responsibility for it exists in our system even if he never knew about it.

Put aside everything else—including that persistently nagging question as to why on earth anybody wanted to bug the Democrats anyhow—and one is still left with the aroma of too much money too roughly used.

Certainly in this context alone, if in no other, the President owes it to the country, to his administration and to

his continued effectiveness to make a full and candid statement of who did what and why. Though it is unfair, it is inevitable that this or any other President is held to be aware of anything and everything that may happen in or around his administration.

If, as some believe, Mr. Nixon was grossly let down here by some of his own people, he will be doing nothing petty simply to tell the country as much. To the contrary, he will be doing a necessary and healthy thing. It is no shame to change one's mind when and as the evidence seems to dictate such a change.

This columnist, for one, freely owns to having taken a most reserved view last year about "Watergate disclosures." First, it was after all an election year. Secondly, I have seen many a "scandal" quietly die for lack of substance. Thirdly, the administration's complaint that it was being assailed by basically unfriendly journalistic quarters had some merit in the sense that there was and is a strong anti-Nixon bias in part of the media. Fourthly, I have always wanted to see solid proof before bringing in any personal verdict of guilty, as I did long ago when right-wing interests were attacking men and institutions in the Joe McCarthy era.

In my view, enough has now come out to suggest that journalistic activity here was basically sound, and especially in regard to Republican use of campaign money.