

The Fearless Spectator

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Did Nixon Know?

THERE IS that famous story about the Duke of Wellington. A man came up to him at a public function and asked if he was Mr. Jones. The conqueror of Napoleon and lord warden of the Cinque Ports looked hard at the man.

"If you can believe that," said Wellington, "you can believe anything."

For my part, if you believe Richard Nixon did not have prior and current knowledge of the monkey business at Watergate, you can believe anything.

The way Mr. Nixon operates and the sinuities of his intelligence leave no smallest doubt in my mind that he not only knew about the espionage operation but

probably oversaw it to the smallest detail. The mere fact that the President denied prior knowledge is, sadly, no good reason for believing him.



For there is a new word going the rounds in Washington these days. The word is deniability. Even before Mr. Nixon cleansed the Aegean stables last week, the word was out that people like John Mitchell, and the Messrs. Haldeman and Ehrlichman had utterly lost their deniability. It was just not possible to believe anything they said. The President's deniability coefficient, too, is at a low ebb these days.

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FOR A MAN who makes few political mistakes, that speech was a corker. What we saw was a lonely, nervous and distressed middle-aged gentleman trying to explain that some knaves and liars he had dismissed hours before for being knaves and liars somehow weren't that at all.

Mr. Nixon, with all his resourcefulness and political guile, simply wasn't up to the task, intellectually, emotionally or physically. Mr. Nixon was a man plainly worn out by the aggravations of Watergate.

A common reaction to the speech, even from people who have hated his guts for years, was that they felt sorry for the man.

Before the firings that distinguished old observer of the Washington scene, journalist Arthur Krock, told a British reporter that "Nixon looks about three to Grant and Harding (in terms of corruption), but trailing a fair way back." I wonder how Mr. Krock would place the ratings today?

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WATERGATE is not going to go away with a mere public washing of the hands. This matter, as knavish as it was, is but the tip of the iceberg. It seems inevitable that the press and the Congress will submit the whole administration to the most stringent review in the coming months of Mr. Nixon's public service.

There are major unexplained scandals, of which the worst is the ITT antitrust settlement. There is the cloudy matter of the Department of Agriculture playing footsie with the large grain companies that made huge profits out of last year's Russian wheat sale.

And there is the milk scandal. Nobody has yet convincingly explained the connection between the Nixon Administration's decision to raise milk price supports and the subsequent heavy donations by the dairymen to the Republican war chest in the last political campaign.

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IN ALL of these matters the White House has acted just as it acted in the Watergate affair until some of the principals began chanting before grand juries and Congress and the indefatigable Washington Post. Public indignation was treated with high scorn by the junta in the White House. Mr. Nixon was above it all. The dubious doctrine of executive privilege became the highest law of the land.

Big deals were followed by big coverups. Now that the pattern is clear, and becoming clearer, we are beginning to realize the horrid truth: The country has been up for sale, and some of the buyers make old Grant's cronies look like petty yeggs.