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Why Didn't Nixon Know About The Watergate?

Washington

BY THIS TIME most Americans are as sick of the Watergate story as small-town residents are sick of the smell of the local paper mill, but some things have to be lived with. We will be living with the Watergate for months and years to come.



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As the charges, revelations and rumors have piled up, one great question has hung like a mushroom cloud in the sky: Did he know? Did Nixon know of the plot to bug Democratic National Headquarters? Did he know of the several secret funds? Did he know generally where the money came from and where it went? Did he know of the "Department of Dirty Tricks"? Did he know of the cover-up?

In his emotional television speech, Nixon implicitly answered the question: He did not know. One has to say "implicitly," because his denial was not direct and comprehensive, and perhaps it could not have been.

But the thrust of his speech was clear. He was "appalled" and "shocked" by the break-in itself, and he is now determined to get to the bottom of "this whole sordid affair."

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I MAY BE naive, but I accept the President's assertion of his own non-involvement. It is entirely plausible, given the personal and political situation that obtained 16 months ago, that Nixon did indeed delegate his whole campaign operation to John Mitchell, Maurice Stans, Jeb Magruder and others, so that he could free his mind for the total concentration demanded by his job.

All right This gives us a picture of a President so far ahead in the spring and summer polls that his reelection is never in doubt. Now and then he asks about the campaign organization, how it is going. "Fine, chief, fine."

In June he reads of the Watergate burglary, and alarms go off in his head. He orders an investigation, but repeatedly he is assured by trusted aides (principally, we may assume, by John Dean) that he has nothing to worry about.

As September slides into October, the Washington Post is crackling with sensational disclosures, but he "discounts" these newspaper stories. The Post has hated him since the days of Alger Hiss.

It is not until the middle of March 1973, nine months after the break-in, that he at last is persuaded of the "real possibility that some of these charges were true." Painfully, but decisively, he acts.

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VERY WELL. But, alas, one mushroom cloud yields to another. A second question, not so plausibly answerable, takes shape: Why didn't he know?

One answer is that the persons to whom he had delegated campaign responsibility, were themselves ignorant of what was going on. The answer strains credibility to the breaking point.

On this hypothesis, we must assume that John Ehrlichman, H. R. Haldeman, John Mitchell, Maurice Stans, Jeb Magruder, John Dean, Charles Colson, Herbert Kalmbach, Dwight Chapin — the list goes on and on—that all of them were deaf, dumb and blind.

We are asked to believe that none of them knew or suspected that anything unscrupulous was afoot. This I cannot believe.

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WHAT THEN? We are driven inexorably to an alternative answer, and it is the saddest answer of all. We are driven to the surmise that these dedicated and loyal servants did not report to Nixon because they assumed they were doing what the boss wanted done.

The bitter, galling truth is that Nixon's own record, in the campaigns he personally directed, is not free of "shady facts."

Given so aggressive a master — a master now so preoccupied with great affairs of state — what would these loyal aides say to one another?

"Don't bother him with that . . . He doesn't need to know . . . It's better not to tell him . . . If he asks, say things are fine, chief, fine . . ."

In time, as the situation gets out of hand, confession and disclosure become more difficult. Panic sets in, and bad judgments turn to disastrous judgments. Nixon, ill-served and long-deceived, looks up at last and is appalled.

"The man at the top," he said, "must bear the responsibility. I accept it." That responsibility may be the heaviest Nixon ever has assumed; but if he now carries it bravely and honorably, he and his high office may yet emerge from this ordeal tempered by the fire.

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