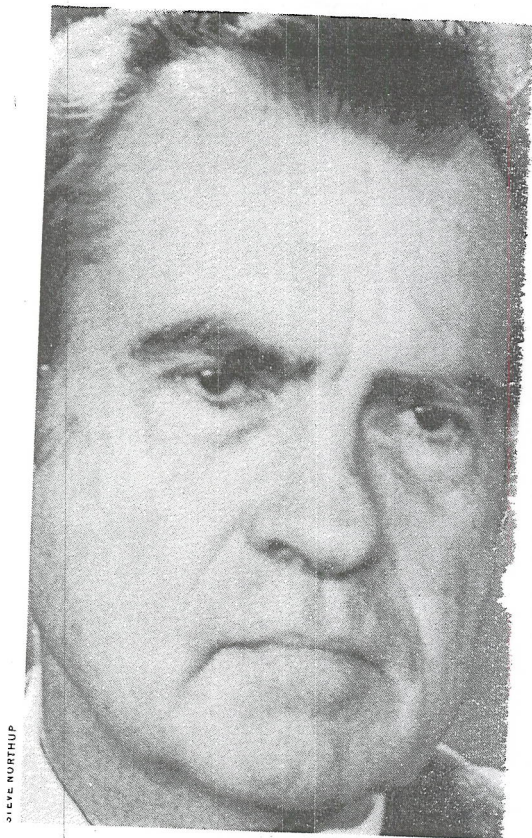


7 MAY 1973



STEVIE NORTUP

PRESIDENT RICHARD NIXON

THE ADMINISTRATION

It Gets Worse: Nixon's Crisis Of Confidence

WITH each passing hour the Government crisis in Washington grew more tense. A federal grand jury was meeting secretly to consider indictments of high Nixon officials in the Watergate wiretapping and its cover-up. The President was spending long days considering what to do about the scandal. The dismissal or suspension of some of his closest aides was not only anticipated, but overdue. Around the capital, the suspense was complicated by a pervasive air of unreality, a sense of something gone disastrously wrong very near the center of the nation's power. Yet there was no word from Nixon. All of Washington, not to mention the country, wondered: What was the President waiting for? Why didn't he act?

Only a few weeks ago, Nixon had seemed at the very peak of his power. Now he was suddenly besieged. The economy seemed mismanaged, prices still out of control. The peace in Southeast Asia was precarious. Above all, Watergate—which once could be dismissed as a pointless political caper—not only impugned the character of the top men around Nixon, but raised deeply troubling doubts about the President himself, clearly affecting his abil-

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ity to govern and to lead the nation.

No hint of why Nixon had not taken any dramatic action to clean up the mess could be discerned in what was known of the President's secretive activity. He consulted one of the few advisers in whom he still has trust, Secretary of State William P. Rogers. State Department sources confirmed that Nixon wanted Rogers to lead a housecleaning; Rogers declined, suggesting that to gain full public confidence someone outside of the Administration must be called in. Nixon sounded out another trusted associate, former Defense Secretary Melvin Laird, who also said no, thanks. But why didn't Nixon assume the onerous duty himself?

Ominous. Within the distraught White House staff, speculation about an ominous answer grew beyond the whisper stage. The President was seen at least twice in consultation with John J. Wilson, a Washington attorney who had been retained by two of Nixon's most intimate aides: H.R. Haldeman, the White House chief of staff, and John Ehrlichman, the President's adviser on domestic affairs. Since their names were increasingly being mentioned by other suspects in the Watergate conspiracy as either trying to cover up White House knowledge of the affair or helping to pay the wiretappers to keep quiet, they had ample reason to hire a lawyer. But why was Nixon seeing Wilson? Said one White House source: "Wilson was retained by Haldeman and Ehrlichman to warn the President that they will not go easily or readily." The implication: pushed to the wall, these aides might reveal that Nixon himself was part of the cover-up conspiracy.

There is no proof of that. Yet neither is there any certainty that Nixon was unaware of the kind of intelligence activity his aides were contemplating. While most editorialists and columnists seem to doubt that Nixon knew about Watergate in advance, a prominent adviser to the Administration expressed a frequent line of speculation. "I can imagine an Oval Office conversation like this between Nixon and his aides: 'Don't worry, boss. We have ways of finding out what those s.o.b.s are doing'—and Nixon letting it pass." The likelihood that the President promptly learned of White House involvement once the Nixon committee had been linked with the arrested wiretappers—but failed to admit it—is far greater.

More and more, Administration officials find it simply unbelievable that former Attorney General John Mitchell, a longtime Nixon confidant who has belatedly admitted attending three meetings at which the Watergate wiretapping was discussed, did not immediately tell the President everything he knew after the wiretappers had carried out their plans. If, as Mitchell maintains, he repeatedly refused to approve the Watergate plot, there seemed no reason for him to refrain from telling Nixon which officials had ignored him

and gone ahead. The *Washington Post* reported last week that Nixon had, in fact, been warned at least three times, beginning in January, that his White House aides were trying to conceal their advance knowledge of the affair.

As Nixon hesitated, much of the normally smooth-functioning White House machinery came to a standstill. Conceded one White House official: "The ship of state lies dead in the water." The daily White House staff meetings chaired by Haldeman stopped. An air of mutual suspicion and self-protection paralyzed much of the staff. Even the most innocent aides assumed that their office telephones were being tapped. Recently, a ranking member of Nixon's staff suspected that his whole office was bugged. When a superior entered and asked some questions, the real replies were scribbled on a pad and given to the boss, while the two continued an innocuous conversation.

In both the White House and the Justice Department, officials resorted to black humor, forming betting pools on just who would be indicted by the grand jury. A commonly heard quip was: "Well, let's hope they go to jail with honor." The situation seemed to be spinning out of anyone's control:

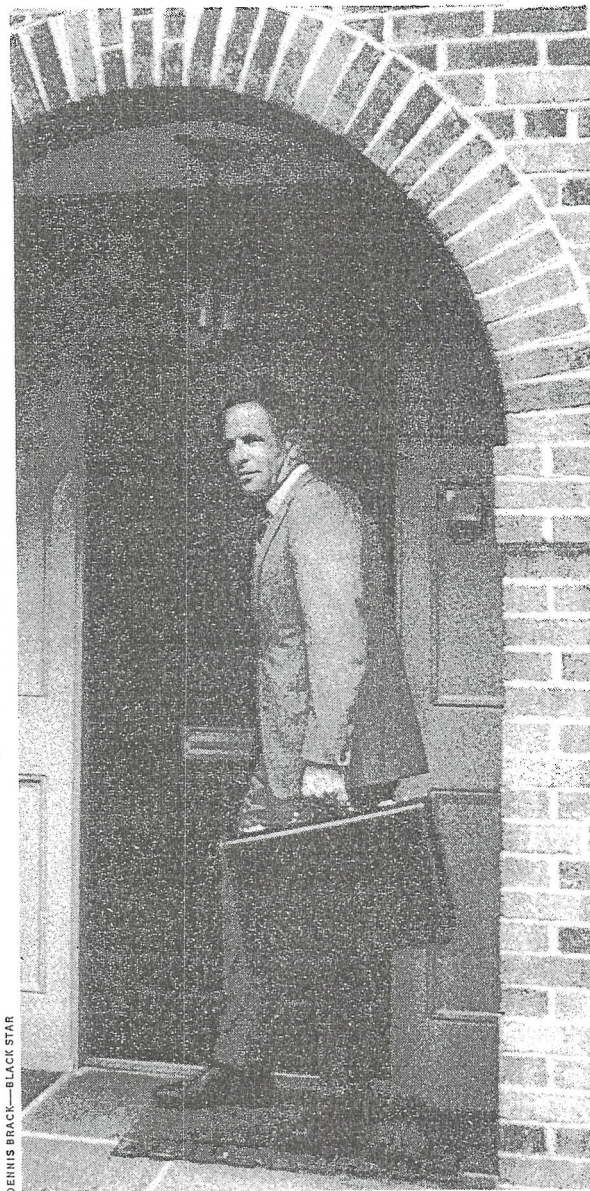
► The FBI's acting director, L. Patrick Gray III, was said to have destroyed papers that came from the Executive Office Building safe of one of the convicted wiretappers—and he claimed that he had done so at the prompting of Ehrlichman and Nixon's chief counsel, John W. Dean III. Gray abruptly resigned.

► Two of the convicted Watergate conspirators were reported by the Justice Department to have burglarized the office of a psychiatrist to seek damaging evidence against Daniel Ellsberg (see following stories).

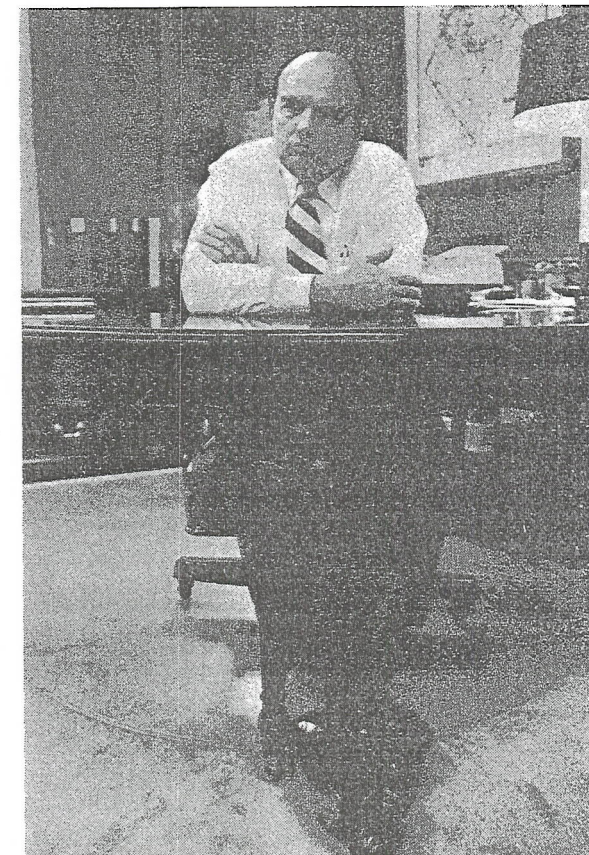
Those two developments added a new, sinister, almost police-state dimension to the affair. Meanwhile, the President, who is reported to be "furious" about the whole miserable matter, remained silent.

Nixon suffered the further indignity of hearing his Vice President, Spiro T. Agnew, attest to his boss's integrity—thereby calling attention to the fact that it was in question. For several weeks, Agnew's aides had spread the word that the Vice President was "appalled" by Nixon's handling of the Watergate scandal. But Agnew last week read a 90-second prepared statement saying that he wanted it known that "I have full confidence in the integrity of President Nixon and in his determination and ability to resolve the Watergate matter to the full satisfaction of the American people."

Across the U.S., concern about Watergate, long so surprisingly minimal, was clearly growing. Many Nixon adherents were still dismissing it as "just politics" or claiming that "everyone does it—they just got caught." Nixon critics claimed that Watergate only



WHITE HOUSE CHIEF HALDEMAN AT HOME

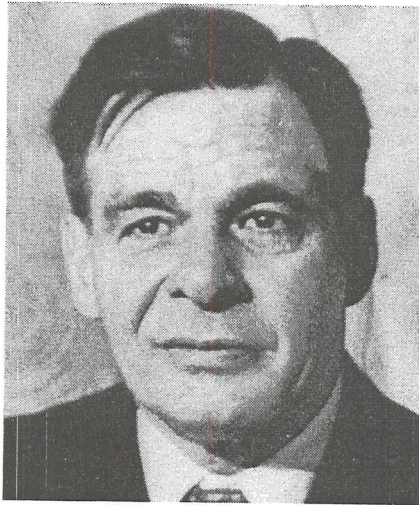


PRESIDENTIAL ADVISER EHRLICHMAN AT WORK

THE NATION

demonstrated what they had always felt about "Tricky Dick." Yet vast numbers in the middle, from which Nixon had hoped to build a permanent Republican New Majority, were becoming aroused. The conservative *Detroit News* also showed how opinion was shifting. On April 19, the *News* declared: "Smelly as the Watergate incident is, it would be a mistake to make it into a major scandal." Last week the *News* asked, "Is it overplayed?" and answered no. Watergate now indicated "a pattern of spying, lying, bribery and payoffs that derogate the entire political system and are unworthy of a great democracy." Even Conservative Columnist William F. Buckley Jr. suggested last week that if Nixon is found guilty of obstructing justice in the case, he ought to be censured by the Congress. Buckley, although he likes Agnew, conceded that impeachment of Nixon would be unfair to all those who would not accept the Vice President as their leader.

Nixon may yet recover from Watergate's most serious implications if he quickly and personally acts to dismiss anyone in whom he has lost confidence because of the affair. Such aides are now a clear liability to him. He need not wait for indictments, assuming he now knows who was involved. If he does not, he has been astonishingly negligent. As Mississippi Democratic Senator John Stennis noted last week, Nixon has



ASSISTANT ATTORNEY GENERAL PETERSEN

survived other crises, and may yet be able to "tough it out."

Yet Nixon cannot readily shake the damage done to his own reputation by so many people operating so improperly in his name. Unlike most Washington scandals in the past, Watergate is not a case of a few officials trying to steal public money or use their influence for private gain. Most of the clandestine activities were undertaken in a blatantly amoral atmosphere for the sole purpose of helping to re-elect Richard Nixon or of concealing that effort by subverting the judicial process. These were all Nixon's men. His presidency, and his place in history, are contaminated by them.