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The Nixon Ethic And How It Works

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FAVORITISM was the charge levelled against the administration's treatment of the big grain dealers who profited so handsomely in the recent Russian wheat deal. No one seriously contended that a crime had been committed.

So it figured that President Nixon, following a dubious claim by Vice President Spiro Agnew that an FBI investigation was on, would actually order an investigation by the bureau.

In the Watergate affair, the deepest suspicion is that the attempted break-in to Democratic headquarters had something to do with former officials of the Nixon Administration who have been active in the President's reelection campaign. In particular, attention centered on former Secretary of Commerce Maurice Stans, who is campaign treasurer, and former Attorney General John Mitchell.

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MR. NIXON was asked about all this in his news conference of August 29. He made what he called a "categorical" statement that "no one in this administration, presently employed, was involved in this very bizarre incident."

At the same news conference Mr. Nixon dealt with charges that the administration might cover up the investigation. As barriers against a whitewash, he cited "a full field investigation by the FBI" and prosecution by the Justice Department.

But now it comes out that the Justice Department has not pressed those indicted for the break-in on the source of their funds. Stans, who is a potential source, has refused to be questioned. And the Washington Post has developed a story to

the effect that Robert Mardian, a former Assistant Attorney General and leading figure in the reelection campaign, directed the destruction of documents pertinent to the Watergate affair.

As a final case, there was the bitter argument last month about the bombing of North Vietnam and the dike system. The serious charge made explicitly by United Nations Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim, is that the bombing endangered the dikes.

But President Nixon chose to make it seem that the issue was whether the bombing of the dikes was deliberate. In his press conference of July 27, Mr. Nixon gave one answer which went on for 24 paragraphs without once acknowledging that we were indeed hitting the dikes or that the bombing did, as Waldheim truly asserted, endanger the dike system.

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WHAT emerges from all this is the Nixon ethic. In every instance, the President and his men obscure moral issues. They reply forthrightly to charges not made. When it happens to them to tell the truth, the truth they tell is not the whole truth.

Exactly why this is so baffles me. The President's sense that people are out to get him — they kick him around, as he once put it — probably plays a part. So does the will to win and the emphasis on being first. But even allowing for all these things, I really don't understand the constant disposition to hedge the truth, to con people.