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Watergate--Now A Political Bomb

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A FLURRY of developments has suddenly transformed the Watergate affair from a sideshow to a political bomb that could blow the Nixon Administration apart. For the first time, suspicion is beginning to gather around Richard Nixon.

At the outset, Watergate seemed pure nuttiness. The freakish character was not much changed when it became known that two of those involved had connections with President Nixon's reelection campaign — James McCord, a former CIA employee who was security chief for the campaign committee, and E. Howard Hunt, another former CIA official who had a White House office.

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THE CASE took on a deeper character when the Washington Post disclosed that there was a general Republican fund to penetrate and sabotage the Democratic campaign effort. According to the Post, the White House chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, and former Attorney General John Mitchell both had access to the fund. One beneficiary was said to be Donald Segretti, a California lawyer hired to undertake the sabotage mission by Haldeman's chief assistant and President Nixon's appointments secretary, Dwight Chapin.

Even so, sabotage could be laughed off as a kind of prank. But consider the latest developments.

First, there is the letter sent by McCord as he faced sentencing for his part in the original Watergate break-in. In that letter, McCord stated flatly that "perjury occurred during the trial in matters highly material to the structure, orienta-

tion and impact of the government's case."

He said that "political pressure" had been "applied to the defendants to . . . remain silent." He said: "I cannot feel confident in talking with an FBI agent, in testifying before a grand jury whose U.S. attorneys work for the Department of Justice . . ."

Then there is the role of John Dean III, the young lawyer who is the President's counsel. There is now evidence that Dean himself lied to the FBI about Watergate. Acting FBI director L. Patrick Gray testified that Dean told the FBI he did not know that Howard Hunt, one of those involved in the original Watergate break-in, had a White House office.

In fact, Dean had earlier taken into his own possession materials in Hunt's White House office.

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FINALLY, there is the stand taken by President Nixon himself on testimony by White House officials before a bipartisan Senate committee set up to investigate Watergate. The committee has been eager to question Dean and Dwight Chapin. But their appearance is being blocked by the doctrine of executive privilege.

What all this means is that the issue is no longer political sabotage by low-level operators. The issue is obstruction of justice by a systematic cover-up at the highest levels. A cloud has been cast over the Justice Department and the FBI. A time-honored doctrine — the doctrine of executive privilege — has been perverted.

The man in the middle is now President Nixon.