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A Sinister Affair

The Watergate affair has taken an astonishing and profoundly disturbing turn.

At first, it seemed that the men arrested for burglarizing and "bugging" the offices of the Democratic National Committee in the Watergate Building in Washington, D. C., were engaged in an ugly but isolated act of political espionage. But investigative reporting by The Washington Post and other newspapers has now uncovered a complex, far-reaching and sinister operation on the part of White House aides and the Nixon campaign organization. This operation involves sabotage, forgery, theft of confidential files, surveillance of Democratic candidates and their families and persistent efforts to lay the basis for possible blackmail and intimidation.

For more than a year, a secret fund existed in the Nixon headquarters which financed these "special activities" and to which only certain key officials had access. Many hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash flowed through this secret fund. Dozens of people, including numerous ex-F.B.I. and ex-C.I.A. agents, were employed in this clandestine work. High-ranking officials including some still employed at the White House and at the Committee to Re-elect the President received copies of the confidential reports prepared by these agents on the basis of their wiretapping and their surveillance of leading Democrats.

A notably dramatic episode involves a letter which surfaced in the New Hampshire primary last February. It stated that Senator Edmund S. Muskie, while campaigning in Florida, had made a derogatory reference to Americans of French-Canadian background. The letter never seemed plausible on its face but, played up by the scurrilous Manchester Union Leader, it weakened Mr. Muskie among French-Canadian voters in that city.

It is now asserted that this letter was forged by a White House staff member in a deliberate effort to weaken Mr. Muskie, then the front-running Democratic candidate. The staff man has denied the allegation, but Senator Muskie is surely right that this serious charge and the many others which have come to public knowledge in recent weeks demand a personal response by President Nixon. The veracity and integrity of the President's staff and campaign organization are at stake.

Much of the public has reportedly taken the attitude up to now that there is nothing particularly unusual in the Watergate affair. It cannot be reiterated too strongly that, on the contrary, such practices are unprecedented in American politics. No national party and no incumbent Administration have ever set out in this systematic fashion to invade the privacy, disrupt the activities, and discredit the leadership of the political opposition. These are ambitions and police-state tactics which have no place in a democracy.