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The Corruption Issue

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We do not intend to be referring so much to the "Watergate affair" in the future. But our decision has nothing to do with the seriousness of the subject—and everything to do with the meaning of words. For just as the term "caper" was quickly outgrown by the developing facts of the heavily bankrolled break-in at the Democrats' Watergate headquarters last June, so the term "Watergate" itself, which inevitably and exclusively points back to that squalid break-in, will no longer do to cover the broad range of related corruption that has been uncovered.

Today we learn from none other than L. Patrick Gray III, the President's choice to head the FBI, that despite all the outraged administration protestations to the contrary, the political saboteur, Donald Segretti, was paid a sizeable sum of cash by Mr. Nixon's personal attorney, Herbert Kalmbach—and that Mr. Kalmbach was acting at the instruction of Mr. Nixon's personal aide, Dwight Chapin. Yesterday and the day before, it was news of the highly questionable relationship between the FBI itself and Mr. Nixon's political operatives. Last week it was the story of Mr. Vesco and John Mitchell and Maurice Stans and—what else?—another small suitcase packed with \$200,000 in cash. We are asked, though with decreasing self-assurance on the part of those who ask us, to dismiss all this on the grounds that *they all do it* (meaning all government officials of both parties) and that it is at most a trivial and marginal excess of the kind regularly committed by every politician. This line of response was always undermined by the fact that it is essentially a child's argument ("all the other kids do it"), and it had the additional—we would say fatal—disadvantage of being completely untrue. For what we are dealing with here is neither pranks nor lapses nor capers nor even traditional political sleaziness. It is distinctive. It is corruption—on a very large scale.

Judge for yourself whether or not the news we have been receiving over the past couple of weeks does not represent something far more chilling and inimical to our fundamental democratic processes than a prank or caper or political hi-jinks. Put yourself in the place of some of those you read about in the FBI-Watergate story on Tuesday. You are one of the honest, law-abiding devoted Republicans who work at the Committee to Re-Elect President Nixon and among the 58 workers who are interviewed by the FBI in the wake of the Watergate break-in. You wish, as an ethical, straightforward person (and one who does not care to risk perjuring yourself or withholding information from federal investigators) to answer their questions freely and fully. You are afraid not to do so—but you are also afraid to do so because your employers at the President's re-election committee have arranged for the interviews with the FBI to take place in committee headquarters and have stationed one of their representatives in the room. So you are among those committee employees (of whom there were a number) who subsequently call the FBI field office and say you wish to have another chance to speak to them—outside committee headquarters and outside the hearing of a committee official. How would you feel

to learn—as we have now learned from Acting FBI Director Gray—that reports on these subsequent voluntary interviews were sent over to John Dean at the White House? Is there not a trapped, nightmare quality there? Does it not represent, at the very least, a deforming of what one had thought of as the normal workings and protections of our system of justice?

There was a time when the answer—admittedly weak, even then—would have been that neither the White House nor the FBI had anything at stake other than the bringing to book of the Watergate criminals. But since then, we have had increasing evidence of White House involvement and FBI acquiescence in the politics of the moment. By his own account, Mr. Gray went out to speak in Cleveland in August in response to a plea from the White House that the President needed some help in Ohio. And we have had, too, Mr. Gray's disclosures of the Kalmbach-Chapin involvement with Mr. Segretti's paid operations. The mind wanders, back inexorably, in this connection, to Dwight Chapin's statement from the White House attempting to disassociate himself from charges of involvement with Mr. Segretti. The news story in *The Post*, he declared firmly at the time, was "based on hearsay" and "fundamentally inaccurate." So much for that.

We come to Mr. Vesco, and here again the bare bones of the story will do to make a judgment on the character of the activities we are talking about. Robert Vesco was under investigation by the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) last year for his part in a multimillion-dollar business scandal. Since then, the SEC has filed a suit in consequence of which some very interesting statements were made by the man who was running Mr. Nixon's New Jersey re-election campaign at the time, Harry L. Sears. Mr. Sears deposed that he had spent some time trying to get former Attorney General John Mitchell to arrange an appointment for him with the top officials at the SEC to discuss Mr. Vesco's troubles. He had gotten no commitment from Mr. Mitchell when he went to visit the President's fund-raiser, Mr. Stans. A contribution (of \$200,000 in \$100 bills) from Mr. Vesco was arranged. Here is the part that interested us most in the news account of all this the other day:

"Less than two hours after he turned the \$200,000 over to Stans, Sears said he met with Mitchell and Mitchell told him that he thought Sears could have the meeting he had requested earlier with Casey."

The reference was to William J. Casey, then chairman of the SEC.

The official explanations for all this proliferate. So too, we expect, must the doubts on the part of those for whom the explanations are intended. The White House would have you believe that these things are important only insofar as they reflect the existence of an uppity press that had the temerity to print them. We think they are important because they happened. Can you any longer have any doubt that they happened after hearing the testimony of—among others—the man in charge of the investigation, Acting FBI Director Gray? Do you think these things *should* have happened? That is the question: Is it really "all right" with you?