

The Heart of the Watergate Matter

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As more and more allegations come tumbling out, some more substantial than others, it becomes increasingly difficult to keep track of that cluster of episodes and issues that are generally lumped under the heading of The Watergate. The heart of the matter is all the more easily lost sight of when the argument turns on such questions as the precise role of this or that White House aide or former Cabinet member in the sleazier aspects of the campaign for the re-election of the President. For all of these questions tend to lead us away from the central fact, no longer susceptible to serious challenge: that both the integrity and the future quality of the political process in this country have been called profoundly into question by the behavior in the 1972 presidential campaign of that mysterious institution known cryptically as the Committee for the Re-Election of the President.

The authority for that last statement does not rest on speculations about who told what to whom—on the second-hand reports of what Mr. G. Gordon Liddy, for example, might have told Mr. James McCord about the role of Mr. Nixon's closest advisers in the Watergate and related matters, or on the question of where former Attorney General John Mitchell fits into it all. We await with interest the clarification of these things, by further court proceedings or by the Ervin committee's public hearings. But we believe that the central point can be clearly perceived right now. It is that a group of people acting on behalf of, and indeed in the name of the President of the United States, subverted the political process in this country in the last election in a way which has no parallel in any presidential election in this country that we have ever heard about.

We know this because seven men have been convicted or have pled guilty to breaking and entering at the Democratic Party headquarters and to bugging the place and tapping the telephones. We know this because the President's own choice to head the FBI, Mr. L. Patrick Gray, has testified under oath that he was told by the President's personal lawyer, Mr. Herbert Kalmbach, that he—Mr. Kalmbach—paid a political operative, Donald Segretti, to do things which have been independently and abundantly characterized as political sabotage and espionage, and that he paid this money on instructions from the President's appointments secretary, Mr. Dwight Chapin. And we know this because we know that large amounts of unreported cash often delivered in suitcases or briefcases and in the form of \$100 bills, were poured into the President's re-election campaign; this comes to us from a sworn deposition in an SEC suit against a man named Robert Vesco and in reports from the General Accounting Office.

There is much more—and much more than enough to make it clear that there was skulduggery and corruption in the last campaign that far transcends any particular incident, such as the Watergate burglary, and far transcends the norm in American politics. Writing on the opposite page today, Mr. Joseph Alsop would have us believe that the uproar over The Watergate derives from the fervent efforts of "key people in the newspaper and television communities" to "cripple the President politically." This, as Mr. Alsop might say, is the silliest sort of twaddle. Much of the uproar we hear nowadays on this subject is coming from Republican Senators and

conservative commentators who have not in the past shown much inclination to do the President in. Mr. Alsop further bids us to find comfort and a better perspective in an examination of the political peccadillos of past Presidents, and this, as he would say, is the purest poppycock. For one thing, as Mr. Alsop concedes, what has been done in this instance "was far more ambitiously organized, and it was immeasurably sillier and more ill-judged."

That is an exceedingly generous way to view burglary and other improprieties and illegalities on behalf of the re-election of a President, but never mind. Let us assume, for the moment, that poor judgment, immeasurably greater than anything we have seen in such matters in the past, is the worst charge to be made against the President and his immediate advisers; surely this is something the public has a right to know about. And much more important, leaving aside whatever further violations of the law may be involved, this is also plainly something for which the President ought to be held accountable and responsible.

According to the word of his own attorney, orders to pay Mr. Segretti came right out of the White House. The men captured or implicated in the Watergate burglary came right out of Mr. Nixon's campaign committee, which was in turn created and, from all accounts, effectively controlled by the White House. Two of the most prominent figures in this committee, its director, John Mitchell and its finance chief Maurice Stans, came out of the President's cabinet. Mr. Mitchell's successor, Clark MacGregor, came out of the White House, as did such prominent figures as Jeb Magruder, G. Gordon Liddy and Howard Hunt. Whatever technical basis there may be for Mr. Ronald Ziegler's sweeping denial of a "White House" connection, as such, it defies common sense to believe that hundreds of thousands of dollars of campaign money were passed to Mr. Liddy without somebody in authority knowing about it—somebody who thought he was doing what the President wanted done. Are we to believe, as Mr. Ziegler suggests, that the Watergate Seven were an entirely autonomous unit, working, let us say, on a masters degree in American politics, when they decided to conduct intelligence operations against the Democrats? Didn't somebody in charge get the results of this intelligence gathering? Wouldn't that somebody have wanted to know how it was collected?

What, in short, do these people take us for, with their glib disavowals, their contempt for any inquiry, their concealments and evasions and dissembling about matters of plain fact? That is what is so ridiculous about the thesis that the outcry over the Watergate is some effort to "cripple the President politically." For if anybody is crippling anybody in this matter it is Mr. Nixon, by the very nature of his reaction to the outcry, who is crippling himself. If he has "nothing to hide", as he instructed Senator Scott to inform us, he could have whisked the Watergate out of the public mind in a matter of a few days, by simply telling us what it was all about and taking whatever remedial measures that might be appropriate. And he could probably do so now, by sending his men up to testify before the Ervin Committee with no holds barred—if he has nothing to hide.