

The White House and the Watergate

We do not know what "major developments" President Nixon may have found in what he described as a renewed investigation he ordered in March of the sordid Watergate affair. We do not know either precisely what new developments may be imminent—although, like everyone else, we assume something portentous is in the air, some turn of events in the judicial proceedings that will be known soon enough. In the meantime it seems to us there are one or two things to be said about the President's summary reversal of position on the Watergate saga in general and on the obligation of his aides to cooperate with the courts and the Ervin committee in particular. And the first of these can be summed up as a provisional sigh of relief. For neither the processes of criminal justice nor the prestige of the presidency nor the self-respect of the American people was being served by the policy of resistance, evasion and diversionary counterattack that had emanated from the White House since last spring. We welcome the actions Mr. Nixon now has taken.

In this regard we would make a sharp distinction between two aspects of the President's remarks (and Mr. Ziegler's elaborations) on Tuesday. That the President has revoked his own untenable prior position on forbidding past and present aides to testify before Congress seems to us commendable, but only in the sense that it meets what must be regarded as the minimum requirements of a fair and constitutionally proper investigation. To our mind, the far more important aspect of the President's revised position is that he now appears to have made a public commitment to letting the facts of the scandal come out. Like so many automobiles with so many defective steering wheels, the entire litany of belligerent and artful White House denials has now been recalled to the factory: all previous White House statements on the case, as Mr. Ziegler put it, are now "inoperative." Indeed, Mr. Nixon, in expressing his gratification that "real progress has been made in finding the truth," seemed, in one astonishing swoop, to be assuming leadership in the battle to bring the Watergate facts to light.

The good Lord knows there is room for irony here—and doubtless room for plenty of jokes. But we believe that this is a moment to indulge neither. Mr. Nixon, by virtue of the policies he has now evidently overturned, managed to do both himself and his office (and thus, by extension, all of us) a great deal of harm. He is now

taking what must be difficult and painful steps to undo that harm. Whatever has suddenly impelled him to action and however much the original scandals have been compounded by the official actions and obstructions that followed over the past several months, it seems to us that the objective of redeeming the credibility and honor of the presidency is one well worth pursuing and one in which critic and defender of Mr. Nixon alike have a stake. It seems to us too, that enough hocus pocus has gone on over the months since the Watergate first came into the news and enough has occurred that suggested an official deforming of our processes of justice to recommend a little caution now: no single statement and no grand jury action—no matter how cataclysmic it may at first appear—can be regarded as summarily and definitively resolving all the large and ugly questions that have been raised.

Our final thought is for that poor-old battered wreck of a thing, much maligned and misused, called the System. Events since the Watergate burglary last June should have taught us two things about it. One is that not all its underminers are to be found in the ranks of the violent social dissidents in this country. The other is that, given half a chance (or even less) it somehow, miraculously, works. We are not thinking here specifically of the judicial process or the political structure or the system of checks and balances or anything so theoretical and compartmentalized as that. We are thinking rather of that fail-safe apparatus of public and private institutions in constant motion and interplay, that combination of accident, opportunity, diligence and plain American orneriness that in the end has a way of confounding the official instinct to get away with things that should not be tolerated.

We say "in the end" because it is true that some pretty intolerable things happened in the course of the campaign to re-elect the President, without the public's having an opportunity to take them into account before election day. In that sense, it could be argued that the System did not work as efficiently as it should have. But in another, large sense, it has worked. For when you think about it, the odds were pretty heavily against disclosure, legal action, public furor and an attempt to bring the high-placed, powerful people involved in the scandals to book. Mr. Nixon's statement on Tuesday demonstrated that once again the democratic process beat the odds.