

After the Watergate

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WASHINGTON

WASHINGTON, April 19—Even after the courts and the Senate have passed judgment in the Watergate case, we will still not know what happened here unless we understand the mood and assumptions of the Administration in which these bizarre events occurred.

The mood was conspiratorial. Mr. Nixon has come to the pinnacle of American political life, but always against great odds. From the first, he has been a "loner," fighting against the established institutions of the Congress, the press, the civil service and the universities—all of which he felt were hostile to him.

His assumptions, when he finally prevailed over all of them in one of the greatest personal triumphs in American history, were that they were still against him. So he isolated himself and concentrated power in his White House staff, now under attack.

He reduced the power of the Cabinet. He talked publicly about the "bureaucracy" in Washington as if it were a foreign enemy rather than his servant and ally. Even after his spectacular victory in the Presidential election last November, he defied the Congress to question his aides or appropriate funds he didn't want to spend, and assumed that the inquiries by the press into the Watergate case were not only frivolous but vicious, and maybe unpatriotic.

In short, fear and suspicion have been his companions. He had the example of President Johnson before him. Mr. Johnson had been drummed out of the White House by militant opponents of the Vietnam war. These same militants were still around and might try to defeat Mr. Nixon as they had defeated Mr. Johnson, and President Nixon was surrounded mainly by his friends on the White House staff, who shared his suspicions of the Congress, the bureaucracy and the press, and were loyal primarily to him.

This does not mean that the President knew about the Watergate conspiracy. He is too intelligent to approve such risks in an election against George McGovern which was never in doubt. Also, in fairness to him, he is too smart to get involved in raising funds laundered through Mexico, or recruiting C.I.A. characters to bug Larry O'Brien's telephones.

But the main thing seems to have been missed here. It is that President Nixon did create the atmosphere of fear and suspicion in which others working for him apparently felt that they could use any means to assure his re-election. It is not good enough to convict the burglars at the Watergate, or even to identify the officials who approved it or knew about it, or paid for it. They obviously have to pay the price for breaking the law, but most of them were the victims rather than the originators of the crime that

came out of the atmosphere of conspiracy in which they lived.

This is why McCord, Magruder and the others are beginning to tell the Justice Department, the grand jury and the Senate investigating committee what happened. Aside from trying to save their own skins, they want it known that they were not acting on their own, but operating under instructions for reasons they thought were not only official but honorable.

It is the old problem of ends and means. If the President thinks his Vietnam policy is right, and the Democrats are opposing him, with the aid of a lot of radicals who might disrupt the Presidential election campaign, why not bug Democratic headquarters, and even sabotage the Democratic Presidential candidates? All this must have seemed reasonable under the atmosphere of conspiracy which has dominated the Nixon Administration.

Accordingly, even if John Mitchell, John W. Dean 3d and Jeb Stuart Magruder are indicted, and the President's chief of staff, Bob Haldeman, resigns—not because he knew what was going on but because he didn't protect the President—the problem will still exist.

For the root of the problem here is not criminal or even political but philosophical. President Nixon can easily dump John Mitchell, John Dean, Jeb Magruder and all the rest, but unless he explains that they were not faithful to the ideals and atmosphere his Administration created, they will insist that they were doing what they thought he wanted them to do, and he will still be in trouble.

President Nixon is already in difficulty on other fronts. He is in trouble with the economy, trade, labor, the price of food, and even with his own conservative colleagues like Barry Goldwater on handling Watergate.

After the Watergate case is settled, after the White House staff is cleaned out and reorganized, President Nixon will still need much more support from the public, the Congress and the press than he now has.

This will require a much different atmosphere than we have had during the last four years in Washington, and the President is in a much better position than anybody else to change it. Finding the culprits in the Watergate case won't do it. The problem is the atmosphere of fear and suspicion which made the Watergate tragedy possible, and this cannot be removed by removing Mr. Nixon's aides. The atmosphere of distrust, almost of war between the President on the one hand and the Congress, the press and the civil servants on the other, has been the main problem in the last few years, and this will not be changed, even with a new White House staff, unless the President himself changes it.