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Robert Thompson

Nixon's Prestige Suffers

NEW YORK — In the overall context of our generation — or even of the Nixon Administration — the Watergate scandal is not an event of cataclysmic proportions.

Although it was a shoddy exercise in criminality, apparently perpetrated by men in responsible government positions, the espionage conspiracy against Democratic National Headquarters will not affect the cost of living or our trade deficit or our national security.

IT WILL NOT UNDERMINE the goodwill built up by President Nixon's visits to Peking and Moscow nor will it diminish his prestige when he journeys to Europe in the fall.

What the Watergate incident has done, however, is raise serious questions about the character of some of the men who surround the President, men who were presumed to hold the public trust.

In addition, the scandal has forced the President into a reluctant about-face. After months of refusing to permit his present and past White House assistants to testify before the Senate investigation of the Watergate case, he has suddenly backed away from his stringent reading of "executive privilege" and opened the way for such testimony.

It is difficult to escape the gut feeling that the President thought his intransigence on the testimony of White House aides coupled with public denials of any wrongdoing by other administration officials would take the wind out of the Watergate balloon.

But he had not counted on the tenacity of the Washington Post, a newspaper he dislikes with intensity, or the determination

of Sam Ervin, one of the most able and respected men in the Senate.

The Watergate affair is, of course, deeply mired in politics. The Democrats see a chance to tarnish Nixon and win votes in the 1974 elections.

The President does not want his national standing jeopardized by tawdry scandal. He remembers the damage that was done to Harry Truman's image by the deep freeze scandal and, to a lesser degree, to Dwight Eisenhower's image by the vicuna coat scandal.

But as a lawyer and former congressional investigator, the President should have realized from the very beginning that his only sensible course was to provide complete White House cooperation with those probing the case.

The true facts surrounding the conspiracy may well have been kept from Nixon. But that is all the more reason for him to have joined in the effort to ferret out the truth.

WHATEVER THE OUTCOME of the Watergate probe, it will largely be forgotten in history as Nixon's foreign policy achievements loom larger and larger. This is what happened to Harry Truman, a President for whom Nixon has gained respect during the past two decades.

At the moment, however, the President's prestige has suffered a blow. He is in the position of having appeared to cover up a scandal within his administration until it became brutally apparent that it could not be covered up. That is unfortunate for Nixon and for the presidency.