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Watergate: A Crisis Of Confidence

After months of looking the other way, White House loyalists now proclaim Watergate a national tragedy. They say the President may be unable to govern effectively, particularly in foreign affairs, and they hint that critics should now go easy.

But that line of argument has been known since classical times as the tyrant's plea. It must be scrutinized with meticulous care, now as always.

Consider first the men around the President. Figures of substance have not been touched by Watergate. If anything, Henry Kissinger, chief foreign policy adviser, and George Shultz and Arthur Burns, the chief economic advisers, come out of the affair not only spotless but with enhanced prestige.

A handful of political operators, to be sure, were deeply involved in the sabotage plans and the cover-up. They have to go—and the sooner the better. But the departure of Haldeman and company is no loss.

Long before Watergate they had established themselves as men of no distinction in business, the professions, mind or spirit. Their lack of achievement daily mocks those who were pleased to throw stones at the elite staff of the previous administrations. Their places can be filled overnight from the bureaucracy, the congress-

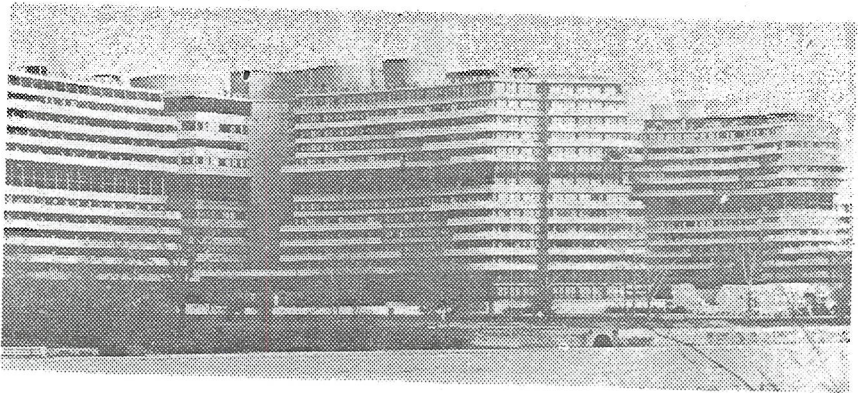
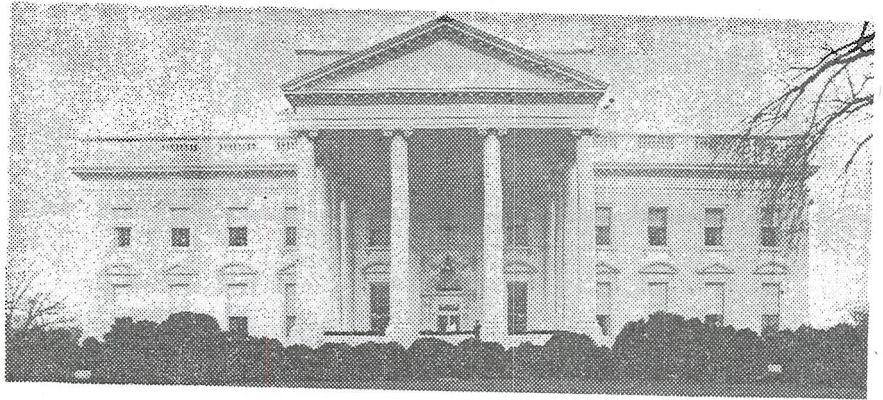
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sional offices, and the major law firms by men of far more competence in government and much more standing in the Republican Party.

Consider next the true impact of Watergate abroad. A few romantic Tories in the English-speaking lands may be dismayed with Peregrine Worsthorne of the London Telegraph to find Mr. Nixon does not possess the conservative virtues they imputed to him. But the typical attitude is surely expressed by the Italian commentator who said of Watergate, "It's worse here."

Certainly there is no reason to believe foreign governments are going to be shocked or scandalized. Least of all the regime which counts most. Anybody who doubts that the Soviet government will take Watergate in stride needs only to read the account in Nikita Khrushchev's memoirs of how the politburo arranged to bump off police boss Lavrenti Beria back in 1953.

Nor is there any important crisis brewing where Mr. Nixon finds himself at the mercy of either foreign foes



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or domestic opponents. Take, first, the falling apart of the Vietnam cease-fire.

The President's special emissary to Indochina, Gen. Alexander Haig, recently reported back that the North Vietnamese had regrouped and refurbished their forces for what might be a new offensive in South Vietnam. But he thought the South Vietnamese forces were well equipped to handle the situation. The only real danger would come if Cambodia fell, and the Communists opened up across that country a new supply line from the sea of South Vietnam.

Such a development is a long way off. Meanwhile there are abundant possibilities for diplomatic action growing out of the divided nature of the Communist forces in Cambodia and their various ties with rival regimes in Hanoi, Moscow and Peking. So, far from the President being obliged to take strong military action in Indochina now, such a step can only be a diversion to draw attention away from Watergate.

The Near East presents a second ticklish situation, particularly given the new militancy of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. But the Israelis can handle any local pressure, and the one serious danger is the danger of a Soviet move.

As it happens, however, Mr. Nixon is magnificently equipped to squeeze Russia now by being sticky about the grain and other trade the Russians are seeking so avidly. The fact that he is not tightening up, but is rather twisting congressional arms to win trade benefits for Russia, is a gauge of how remote the danger truly is.

Inflation represents a final critical issue. But there what Mr. Nixon needs to do to hold the line is to apply, while traversing the difficult period just ahead, a quick freeze. If he took that measure he would have the backing of critics in both parties. The only good reason for not applying the freeze is the belief, apparently dominant in the

White House, that inflationary pressures can be lived with.

What emerges from this analysis is a clear showing that no overwhelming reason of state obliges us to turn away from Watergate the better to support the President. The true crisis at present is the crisis of confidence in government. That can be eased only if Mr. Nixon pushes through on the investigation, the firing, and the prosecution of the men who have abused that nation's confidence. So far he has only begun to come clean.

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