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Mr. Nixon's Watergate Dilemmas

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The seemingly bottomless pit of political dangers besetting Richard M. Nixon on Watergate, etc., can be glimpsed from the savage infighting now going on between those who want him to "go to the country" and those, now in the ascendancy, who insist he courts disaster if he speaks out before knowing all the facts about Watergate.

One of the President's oldest political colleagues, far removed from the slightest taint of Watergate or the backlashing effort to cover up White House involvement in Watergate, has bluntly warned him to "say nothing more until you see the bottom line."

Therein lies the danger. The "bottom line" (a Wall Street phrase signifying the final profit-or-loss figure) may not be visible for weeks or even months. To delay "going to the country" until grand juries, federal courts and congressional investigating committees have all had their say is to run the risk that the poison now permeating the White House will spread and threaten the entire Executive Branch with neurotic civil war and eventual stalemate.

The effect of this civil war now raging inside the White House is far more destructive to the President—and to his party—than generally understood. As one ranking Republican leader in the Midwest told us: "They look like a bunch of rats snitching on each other."

Yet, if Mr. Nixon attempts the full and complete explanation to the American people some Republican politicians are begging him for, late disclosures not now imagined could give the lie to whatever it is that Mr. Nixon has to say in his own defense on Watergate, etc.

Time and again since the Republican buggers were sent scurrying in the Watergate last June, the President's escape-scenario has seemed to come a cropper, overtaken by damning—but unexpected—events.

For example, the apparently airtight financial arrangement worked out to assure the silence of the convicted Watergate criminals turned out not to be airtight at all. It exploded in the face of the White House when James

McCord, Jr., one of the Watergate seven, decided to tell the truth.

Likewise, the careful advance preparations of White House counsel John W. Dean III to pave the way for massive "executive privilege" claims by White House aides under Senate challenge also evaporated in thin air. Once McCord started to sing, the White House plan to forbid "former and present" aides from testifying before any congressional committee collapsed like a house of cards—which it always had been.

There are, moreover, shrewd White House students of Watergate who are convinced Mr. Nixon made a mistake April 17 when he pinpointed March 21 as the precise date on which "serious charges came to my attention" involving Watergate, which led to his "intensive new inquiries" into the matter.

How can Mr. Nixon be certain, these aides are asking, that a grand jury, a congressional committee or some other investigative body won't obtain a sworn statement that the President was forewarned long before March 21 that certain members of his own inner

staff were involved in Watergate? But dwarfing this are possible new revelations, frightening to Republican politicians, which may well expose a whole new set of illegalities before the end of the investigations into Watergate.

Thus some party operatives with ties close to the White House are now certain that high officials of the Committee to Re-elect the President or White House aides are vulnerable on campaign mail-fraud charges, wholesale violations of campaign spending laws and other political corruption.

Hence, Mr. Nixon's dilemma is clear. If he heeds the voices of caution and says nothing to the American people until the "bottom line" is visible, he risks an ever worsening crisis of leadership. If he appeals to his countrymen now, and takes advantage of the yearning to find him wholly innocent of prior knowledge of Watergate, etc., or the far more sinister post-Watergate cover-up, he risks even graver potential dangers.

The web of deceit woven around the President by his closest advisers won't untangle easily.