

# White House Awash in Crisis

By Peter Lisagor  
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## The Watergate Affair

WASHINGTON—It was an irony too obvious to go unremarked.

President Nixon returned from an aerial inspection of Mississippi River flood damage in Mississippi, Louisiana and Arkansas to find the political disasters of Watergate threatening with greater ferocity to engulf the White House.

One major casualty, and several minor ones, already have resulted from the spreading Watergate developments — and this capital awaits what many regard as the unfolding of an inexorable Greek drama, though almost certain to claim top presidential aids as victims.

### Desperate

The President's move to stay the unraveling process by the appointment of his Environmental Protection Agency chief, William Ruckelshaus, as acting director of the FBI, was registered as a desperate application of a band-aid to a cancerous sore.

But the abrupt departure of L. Patrick Gray III as the FBI's interim head, after disclosures that he had burned files of a key figure in the Watergate bugging case, portended further grief for the embattled White House.

Attention now focuses on two Nixon aides, H. R. (Bob) Haldeman, his powerful chief of staff, and John D. Ehrlichman, his top domestic affairs adviser. Both men have been mentioned in allegations of a coverup in the Watergate investigation, but fresh charges have implicated them deeper.

### Denial

Ehrlichman denies a published charge that he directed Gray to destroy material taken from the files of E. Howard Hunt, a former White House consultant who was one of the confessed Watergate conspirators who

broke into and bugged Democratic Party headquarters last June 17.

Gray burned the material after a White House meeting with Ehrlichman and John W. Dean III, counsel to the President who also is involved in the emerging scandals. The material related, according to reports, to the late President John Kennedy's role in the assassination of South Vietnam President Ngo Dinh Diem and to Sen. Edward Kennedy's involvement in the Chappaquiddick episode, which resulted in a woman's drowning.

### Ominous

The revelations surrounding Watergate and other bizarre activity have broken over the White House like an unending series of thundercaps, each more sensational and ominous than the last.

When newsmen were alerted by the White House late Friday that an important announcement was imminent, the expectation was that the President might have decided upon his response to the scandals. Nobody would have been surprised if Haldeman and Ehrlichman had been the subject of the news briefing.

But presidential press secretary Ronald Ziegler, who has been reduced to a polite, grim, almost soft-spoken man by the daily catechisms he undergoes on Watergate, brought Ruckelshaus to the podium of the elaborate press room. For a brief moment, it was thought that the Hoosier lawyer, defeated senatorial candidate and Environmental Protection Agency head had been selected as a special prosecutor.

But Ruckelshaus had only

been named acting FBI director to replace the resigned Gray.

Gray's resignation was only one of several startling developments Friday. Jeb Stuart Magruder, a Commerce Department official who was a major figure in the disclosures, resigned at midnight Thursday. In Los

Angeles, the federal judge presiding over the Pentagon papers trial of Daniel Ellsberg and Anthony Russo ordered an inquiry into a Defense Department report that two of the convicted Watergate figures had burglarized the files of a psychiatrist treating Ellsberg.

The President continues to keep his counsel, pursuing

his own personal investigation, according to Ziegler. But political leaders, especially in the Republican Party, doubt that he can continue to remain silent much longer. Mounting suspicions, apprehensions and personal maneuverings, coupled with the President's obvious preoccupation with the scandals, have left a funeral pall over the administration and hampered the operations of the White House.