

The Watergate Affair

SFE Examiner

APR 29 1973

How the Public Got Mugged

By William Theis

Examiner Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — Somewhere among the Watergate Hotel, the White House and the Justice Department, the public interest has been mugged.

It's not too late to revive the victim and nail the attacker, but even the most sympathetic critics have been dismayed at the executive inaction.

Most of the cries for compassion and protection from

stand the lack of further presidential action.

There have been calls for appointment of a special prosecutor or, of a special "blue ribbon" commission to assure public acceptance.

At midweek in Washington, the point was reached at which the Washington Evening Star-News, a staunch supporter of the Republican Party on most questions but which endorsed Nixon last October with reservations about his character and apparent "arrogance of power," called for an immediate purge of everyone involved in "this sordid affair."

The Star-News even spoke of presidential impeachment as something that "would have to be contemplated" if the President had prior knowledge of the Watergate affair, which he denies. But, noted the editorial, four of ten Americans polled believe he did, so that "amounts to a crisis of confidence in the administration."

The question of legal culpability "will take months to resolve," said the newspaper, but meanwhile the United States must go on. It held that a "wholesale housecleaning of the White House staff is not only desirable but absolutely necessary" to restore "the modicum of credibility required if the executive is to function efficiently."

That modicum of credibility might even be preserved with something less than outright dismissal of staffers involved. Nixon said on April 17 he would suspend anyone indicted by a grand jury and dismiss any later convicted.

Amid all the turmoil, the President was described by Ziegler as working hard backstage to determine "what happened, how it happened, and why it happened."

News Analysis

within the Nixon Administration have been aimed at the individual rights of those accused or suspected of either outright illegality or moral lapse.

Since President Nixon announced on April 17 that "major developments" had caused him to launch his own inquiry of the bugging of Democratic headquarters and associated 1972 Republican malfeasance, the White House explanation of its official silence has been that the rights of accused individuals and protection of the judicial process must come first.

As a matter of fact, reported Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler, the reason for his refusal to answer most specific questions on the Watergate investigation is that "I've been told that's the way I should respond."

Who told him that? Why, the "appropriate legal authority" — none other than Assistant Attorney General Henry E. Petersen, who is heading Nixon's inquiry into the scandal.

Day after day since April 17, as new allegations of White House staff involvement in the Watergate escapade or its coverup appeared in print, politicians and newsmen alike have found it difficult to under-