

Joseph Kraft

Watergate: Talk of Impeachment...

Watergate raises the suspicion (to use a term even the Marquess of Queensbury would probably find excessively gentle) that the President of the United States has been deeply involved in criminal activities. So inevitably there is talk of impeachment.

But the logic of national politics goes overwhelmingly against impeachment. The immediate need is to scotch continuing efforts to cover up the story of what actually happened.

The best gauge of the unreality of impeachment talk is offered by what political leaders are actually saying. Former congressman and Defense Secretary Melvin Laird, for example, said the other day that if the President was involved in the Watergate cover-up, which he doubted, he would not want the country to know about it.

That comment is a sharp warning from perhaps the toughest Republican gun in Washington. Mr. Laird is saying that whoever pushes truly hard on Watergate will be subjected to a slamming counterattack featuring the murderous charge that national unity was destroyed for partisan or personal advantage.

The Democrats have seen the trap and are skillfully avoiding it. Most of them are saying nothing about Watergate. The few who are talking are agreeing with —of all people—their 1972 presidential candidate.

"These are difficult days for President Nixon," Sen. George McGovern told the American Society of Newspaper Editors here in Washington. "We must help him for the sake of the office he holds." Which means, in the English translation, "We have Nixon to kick around for three more years and we're delighted."

Given that political climate, the Congress is not about to embark on proceedings aimed at getting the President out of office. The important thing, in the circumstances, is to get the record clean. That is not easy. There seems to be still under way an elaborate whitewash operation managed by the White House.

The Watergate investigation and prosecution is not being supervised by Elliot Richardson, the former Defense Secretary who has been nominated to be the new Attorney General. Mr. Richardson is staying at the Pentagon until he is confirmed in his new office. Even then it will take him, and anybody else he brings into the case, weeks to become familiar with the vast masses of testimony and investigation accumulated over the past months.

In the meantime, the case is being managed by Asst. Atty. Gen. Henry Petersen, who supervised the original Watergate investigation—the one we now know to have been a fiasco—and proclaimed it to be "among the most exhaustive I have seen in 25 years as a prosecutor." He has more recently been accused of pulling punches in an investigation of the Teamsters Union—a charge that ties in with President Nixon's action releasing the Teamster boss, Jimmy Hoffa, from federal prison.

So Mr. Petersen is a suspect character himself. He cannot possibly have a straightforward, arm's length relationship with the White House and the President. But he is now every day making vital decisions affecting the investigation and future prosecution.

One set of these decisions involves John W. Dean III, the former White House counsel who seems to have

truly extensive information about the Watergate bugging itself, the subsequent cover-up and various other operations of political sabotage conducted by the President's men. He appears ready to talk, provided he is granted immunity from prosecution.

But President Nixon, in a statement issued on April 17, said that immunity would not be granted. Thus it is a major question, perhaps the biggest single question, whether the prosecution is going to grant immunity to Dean and on what terms.

Another critical point relates to the timing and scope of the indictments. If quick and very general indictments pop out, they will cast a shadow over the hearings of the Senate investigating committee due to open on May 15.

Sen. Sam Ervin, the procedural stickler who is chairman of the committee, would probably be loath to have legislative hearings on a case up for court decision. He would almost certainly not be willing to turn the full light of publicity on such hearings. He might even refuse to use the committee's machinery for granting immunity to Mr. Dean.

I am confident that the truth can be forced out. I think we can make our system of checks and balances work without going to the political equivalent of nuclear war—impeachment. But to make the system work, we all have to concentrate on the immediate job at hand, which is getting out the facts.

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