

# The President's Dilemma

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WASHINGTON — The most stimulating get-together of newspapermen in their annual series of springtime conferences is that of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, which ended here Friday.



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Nixon finally acted and explained his own view of the mess.

First he fired his White House counsel, John

This year it was stimulation plus. For this time the nation's capital was experiencing one of its most exciting weeks of recent memory—and newspapers one of their most challenging stories.

That story, of course, was the boiling Watergate scandal which reached a climax on Monday when President

—Turn to Page B2, Col. 7

—From Page 1

Dean III, and accepted the resignations of Attorney General Richard Kleindienst and two of his chief assistants, H. R. Haldeman and John Erlichman. After this bombshell, he went on national television to give his equally dramatic speech of explanation.

We arrived here the day after all this, spang in the middle of all the controversy and speculation which has followed. Watergate, naturally, immediately became Topic A at the conference as editors and speakers alike split generally into three groups on the Nixon performance — for, against, or something in between.

As readers of this column know, comment on Watergate has been deliberately ducked here in past weeks because I thought it only fair to wait until after the President explained his position. Now that he has done so I'm sounding off today, as promised.

First off, let me say this is not an easy column to write. Dick Nixon has been a close friend of mine for the past quarter-century, usually commanding my admiration and support. So it pains me to have to say some of the things I feel obliged to say here now.

Thus, when the President went on the tube Monday night, I expected him to be in a towering rage over the sleazy business which has done such damage to his administration—and especially angry at those in his official family he said misled him on the facts.

But he was not even indignant. Though the scandal has besmirched his fine record of accomplishments and cast a dark shadow over the presidency itself, I found myself listening in astonishment as Mr. Nixon praised his former top aides as "two of the finest public servants it has been my privilege to know."

Then, instead of appointing an unimpeachable investigator from outside the government to expose every ramification of Watergate, he gave the assignment to Elliot Richardson, an extremely able man but one who has been an administration official for some four years.

Mr. Richardson was given the authority to name an outside prober if he sees fit, and seems likely to do so as the result of growing public clamor for such a man. In my opinion, the Watergate scandal is so deep and so extensive that not one but two outside probers should be named to work together in sweeping up the dirt.

This is the action taken by President Coolidge when he learned about the Teapot Dome scandal shortly after President Harding's death. Coolidge cleaned it up by assigning Senator Pomerene, a Democrat, and Owen J. Roberts, a Republican, to catch the culprits.

President Coolidge satisfied the public and restored its confidence with his all-out cleanup. President Nixon has yet to move decisively in the same way.

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THERE WAS NOTHING in the President's speech which is questionable to me as being possibly untrue. But even while believing what he had to say I can't help wondering why he didn't say more and why he waited so long to say it.

The Watergate break-in of Democratic National Headquarters was last June. Certainly in all the time since then he must have at least realized that the whole affair was getting dirtier and dirtier by the week.

Anyhow, it seems clear enough that the President never would have heard anything at all about the mess if it had been left to his White House assistants and to the Justice Department.

In fact nobody would know anything about it today if it weren't for the dedication and persistence of three great American institutions — the press, the judiciary and the Senate.

If the President had held regular press conferences, like his recent predecessors, he would have known long ago that Watergate could not be dismissed as merely a stupid caper.

He would have known, inescapably, just by occasional reading of the stories which were appearing regularly in the Washington Post and other newspapers.

Yet the President remained so isolated, by his own choice, that when the hour of truth inevitably arrived he still seemed to be unaware of how bad the situation was and how drastic his action should be.

Bill McCullam, our chief editorial writer, summed it up accurately:

"The shakeup," he wrote, "however dramatic, involved only one man who was actually fired.

"And the President's speech, despite its emotional affirmation of highest ideals, came both with obvious regret that there was no alternative and with a seeming insensibility to the sweeping importance of a truly historic disgrace."

I'm afraid the President not only has had faulty communication with his White House staff but with the American people as well, who want and deserve a more decisive executive reaction to Watergate than they have gotten.

For a change, I must agree with at least part of a generally hostile article written on the subject by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. in the Wall Street Journal. Here is that part:

"There is only one person who can redeem the credibility and honor of the presidency now, and that is the President. His speech and the house-cleaning were a beginning, but no more. Only the full truth and condign (fitting) punishment will begin to restore confidence in the Administration."

SUCH ARE MY CHIEF COMMENTS, and I will leave it to you to decide which of the three reaction groups attending the ASNE conference I best belong to.

Editors giving all-out backing, and speakers such as the charming and talented Clare Boothe Luce, held that the President has been the wholly innocent victim of stupid zeal — and even more stupid cover-up attempts — by people he trusted to have better sense. They accept his clean-up decisions as adequate.

The editors and speakers giving all-out support to the President furthermore — like the President himself, in my opinion — tend to minimize the whole affair. Some even likened the Watergate break-in to what they called the break-in by Daniel Ellsberg on the Pentagon Papers.

Delegates to the convention who took a wholly unsympathetic view of Mr. Nixon's actions were inclined to criticize most everything he did and said. In the minds of many of them, and some said so, was the conviction that the President knew more than he indicated and thus couldn't have acted more strongly.

The vast majority of those present were both critical and sympathetic, which should give you another clue to my own position in the convention reaction groups.

Persons trying to understand why Mr. Nixon took so long to speak up and do something about Watergate made the point that originally, at least, he must have regarded what little he was told as evidence of continuing personal attack by such liberal papers as the Washington Post and N.Y. Times. To him it was all part of the same old vendetta against him — nothing more.

There may well be something in this. I'm inclined to think, as a matter of fact, that if the Watergate scandal had been broken by the Hearst Newspapers he would have paid a lot more attention than he did.