



The Surgery That Watergate Requires

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"I FEEL LIKE a cancer surgeon," Ron Ziegler said after announcing the latest changes in the White House staff and the Cabinet. And that unguarded comment by the White House press secretary announces the decisive feature of the President's approach to Watergate.

Mr. Nixon and his men still have not got it through their heads that they are part of the cancer. In consequence, all the moves the President has so far taken to rebuild the administration are inadequate.

The basic fact is that Watergate is very different from past scandals. What sets Watergate apart is the element of selfless dedication. The Watergate people did not do what they did to line their pockets.

On the contrary, they acted out of loyalty to Mr. Nixon. In the interest of helping him a little they dragged into the shabbiest campaign practices institutions traditionally held above politics. They prostituted the courts, the FBI, the State Department and the CIA.

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THE ONLY PROOF against that kind of abuse lies in the caliber and quality of the men around the President. Devotion to an individual over an institution has to be rooted out.

The White House staff, of course, is a first candidate for change. It makes sense to bring in at the very top a man of stature and independence who can stand up to presidential pressure — a man like John Connally. But not Connally himself in the ambiguous position of unpaid, part-time adviser.

But Connally has a potent ambition to be President — a job he can only get from Mr. Nixon. He has a wide range of corporate interests in matters — including oil

and gas and cattle and real estate and banking and aviation — intimately affected by presidential decisions. So, far from being a guarantee of an independent White House, the designation of Connally only raises a new conflict-of-interest problem.

The second big candidate for regeneration is the Cabinet. Mr. Nixon, to be sure, has taken one important step in that direction by making James Schlesinger, the strong-minded former head of the CIA, Secretary of Defense. But even the Schlesinger appointment is part of a reshuffle of familiar faces, not an accession of independence from the outside.

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THE OTHER important replacement at the top, Elliot Richardson who left the Pentagon to become Attorney General-designate, is already giving a good example of how entangling past connections with the White House can be. Richardson has been lawyer-like in the extreme, as distinct from straightforward, in addressing himself to the question of whether President Nixon wanted to keep from the Pentagon Papers trial the information relating to the burglary of Dan Ellsberg's analyst by operators working under White House order.

He admits that a vital witness, former White House aide Bud Krogh, had the impression Mr. Nixon wanted the information suppressed. But Richardson never asked Krogh where he got that impression. The suspicion has to be that he didn't want to know.

For all the motions and the talk, in sum, Mr. Nixon has not yet begun the kind of surgery that Watergate truly requires.