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Five Men With 'Daggers'

The remnant of the President's palace guard was visibly shaken, a few days ago, by an episode most people regarded as another bad Watergate joke. What shakes people in the White House is always worth analysis. This is also the background against which all should read the President's sweeping denial of all knowledge or complicity in the Watergate horror.

After a refreshing rest up the Hudson, to begin with, Martha Mitchell made a new kind of public appearance. There was nothing clandestine, this time. No telephones were torn off the wall when the lady was in mid-career. No bottoms were injected with sedatives. The appearance was a semi-formal one, with battalions of reporters and television crews waiting to take down every dulcet word.

After pretty apologies for keeping the press waiting, Mrs. Mitchell said that her John was innocent of all wrongdoing; that the only fault lay with "Mr. President"; and that "Mr. President" ought to resign. She had said it all before. The different circumstances were what struck a new, alarming note.

Given those circumstances, this particular installment in the Martha Mitchell serial must clearly have been tolerated, if not directly stimulated, by Mrs. Mitchell's husband. That was clearly confirmed late the same evening, when Mrs. Mitchell sought her usual solace on the telephone.

The same gramophone record about the need for "Mr. President" to resign was played by the lady once again. But this time Mrs. Mitchell's husband was present and also ready to talk. The President's former Attorney General and closest adviser took the telephone from his wife, to add a qualifying word about the President's blamelessness, and then to swear that no one was going to make him into a "fall guy."

The tale is here re-told, in order to highlight what shook some people at the White House. Mitchell's novel role and Mitchell's oddly contradictory words were the sole sources of disquiet. When Martha had played her gramophone record before, John had tried to stop her, or had laughed it all off as nonsense. But here was John positively winding up the Martha-gramophone for maximum audibility.

The plain truth is that the President's misplaced trust has effectively

put daggers in the hands of five men who served him in confidential capacities. These five are John Mitchell, first and foremost; and then former Secretary of Commerce Maurice Stans, because, of his role as Republican bagman; and the three White House staff members, H. R. Haldeman, John Ehrlichman and Charles Colson.

These five differ from the other strange specimens that the Watergate horror has brought into the light of day. None of the others had access to the secluded President. So far as is known, no one besides these five ever talked with the President alone. But these five had the most free, intimate and close access.

What the lesser fry say they "believed" about the President, or "supposed" were the wishes of the President, is perfectly meaningless. In this city, since time immemorial, all

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sorts of people have tried to give weight to their own views or orders, by using the name of the President of the moment. Nothing about the President's role is proved by what a man like James McCord says—unless McCord can produce a piece of paper initialled "RMN," or can get backing from higher up.

The five with daggers, in contrast, are subject to no such tests. Any one of them can plunge a dagger straight into the President's back, simply by

saying, "Yes, the President knew about the whole ugly business. In fact, he ordered it."

If just one of these five chooses to say that much, it will not even matter whether the man in question is lying or telling the truth. Because of the past positions occupied by these five, it will be fatal if the President is accused of knowledge and complicity by a single one of them. The new situation will then be automatically created, in which Sen. Barry Goldwater has said impeachment ought to be considered.

Another kind of new situation will again be automatically created, however, if all five say under oath, with naught to lose or gain, that the President had neither knowledge nor complicity. It is also desperately urgent for the country to know which kind of situation lies ahead. But this will be the topic of a second report.