

Presidential Confessions

NYTimes

MAY 24 1973

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ESSAY

WASHINGTON, May 23—In one of the most remarkable statements ever issued by the White House, the President made these confessions:

1. A bureaucratic civil war took place in the intelligence community in 1970, pitting J. Edgar Hoover's F.B.I. against our foreign intelligence agencies on the issue of whether to resume authority, ended in 1966, permitting U.S. agents to burglarize for national security reasons. Mr. Hoover, who did not want his men involved in this kind of operation, won. Cooperation between agencies bogged down and our intelligence "deteriorated."

2. The President stated "I approved" the creation of the unit called "the plumbers" to investigate national security leaks after the publication of the Pentagon Papers, and "I told Mr. Krogh that as a matter of first priority, this unit should find out all it could about Mr. Ellsberg's associates and his motives." The picture this calls to mind of a U.S. President acting as angry spymaster is disheartening.

3. The President asserted he told Assistant Attorney General Petersen to "confine his investigation to Watergate and stay out of national security matters." That means the President obstructed the investigation to the extent he felt necessary to protect national security. If his accusers want to say that makes him part of a "cover-up," so be it, which also applies to the next point:

4. The President said, "I instructed Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Ehrlichman to ensure that the investigation of the break-in not expose either an unrelated covert operation of the C.I.A. or the activities of the White House investigations unit. . . ."

5. "It is clear that unethical, as well as illegal, activities took place in the course of that 1972 campaign. None of these took place with my specific approval or knowledge." The President is a lawyer, and is advised by men who are careful about every word in a written statement; the addition of the word "specific" before "approval or knowledge" is probably the greatest single confession of error in the document.

The President's confessions — and these are only a handful of those made in the statement—are confessions of error, not of guilt. He says he misjudged; he did not intend, he "should have been more vigilant." But in terms of the commission of a crime, he admits nothing: The closest to that is the reference to the proposal for "breaking and entering" (I'm glad he defined "surreptitious entry" in plain words) and after Mr. Hoover's objection, he did not direct that burglary be deemed an acceptable activity of the state.

Since the statement seems to raise

more questions than it answers, why did the President put it out?

It enables the men he mentions—Haldeman, Ehrlichman, Krogh, deputy C.I.A. chief Walters—to testify truthfully without seeming disloyal to the President.

It puts information out in a big bucket—not drop by drop, as in the cartoon of water torture inflicted on the Republican party in the post-Harding era.

It reminds the fair-minded of the context of the times; now that Vietnam is over, we tend to forget the fury of the opposition to the war and the real domestic threats some of the protesters posed.

It tries to separate dirty politics, which is unconscionable, from the dirty, but somewhat more conscionable, business of stretching or breaking laws in behalf of national security.

It lays the basis for a press conference in which the President can speak like a lawyer in court, making references to a detailed brief, and not like a defendant telling the story for the first time.

Most important, the statement focuses attention on the dilemma that drew the Nixon Administration into the supersnoop business in the first place: At what point does the defense of our system corrupt our system?

It is satisfying to say, "once you admit it, might be right to break the law for good ends, you wind up breaking it for bad ends." Or "an obsession with security leads to political paranoia, and the overreaction to dissent turns leaders into would-be dictators." Or, in regard to association with people you have degraded by requiring them to do the dirty work, to apply the adage, "When you lay down with dogs, you get up with fleas."

There is much truth in that, but how far are we willing to take the argument? How do we protect our secrets? Is it such a good idea to try to uncover another country's secrets? Do we need a covert operation in C.I.A. at all anymore? Was young Henry Stimson ultimately right when he stiffly remarked, "Gentlemen do not read each other's mail"?

The President, after two months, has decided upon a strategy to deal with Watergate: To admit error rather than guilt, and to change the battleground from "was the President involved in these sleazy political shenanigans?" to a loftier "what liberties are we prepared to give up for national security?"

For a man with his back to the wall, it is a daring strategy, but it is risky, too—for one of the fruits of the détente Mr. Nixon brought about is a long-awaited lessening of the lust for secrecy, and another is a growing reluctance to subvert the law in the name of national security.