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Watergate: Surviving Cynicism

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WASHINGTON — The immediate focus of Watergate should not be the institution of the Presidency; it must be the Nixon Administration. The trouble is that too many are asking that we blur the distinction. In rallying around the Presidential flag, they inevitably risk falling under the banner of cynical disregard for the facts and the law. In seeking to save the Presidency, they could destroy it.

Alarmed cries that the Presidency itself is at stake are coming from many quarters. While ruling out a whitewash, but showing little effort to prevent one, the President himself says: "We must maintain the integrity of the White House." Senator McGovern supports the President: "He is the elected leader of the nation, and he is struggling to restore his leadership. We must help him for the sake of the office he holds." A respected columnist feared for the system: "The American system cannot take the proof, even the strong unresolved suspicion, that the chief executive himself was personally involved in crass illegality. That proof, even that suspicion, could destroy the system." A former Cabinet officer says he wouldn't want the truth to come out if the President were involved: "I don't want to know. I'm confident the President didn't have any knowledge of this, but I don't want to put the Presidency in a position where it's on trial. A trial of the Presidency would be very dangerous, a bad mistake."

What is dangerous is thinking that investigations or even proof of wrongdoing at the Nixon White House, even at its highest levels, must damage the Presidency. There are two principal fallacies in thinking that it must.

First, such a view misinterprets the past. The Presidency as an institution has been highly resilient. It has survived terrible traumas before.

The harm to this Administration inflicted by Watergate is a problem for the next three and one half years. A new President, Republican or Democrat, will be given a clean slate in January, 1977, as Mr. Nixon was in 1969. Perhaps Watergate will even make the country want more than ever to believe in the new President.

Second, and more important, such a view not only ignores history, it could blind us to the present and the future. Our hope must be that the President was not criminally culpable in Watergate, related messes, and the cover-up. If not, if he were involved, we face a terrible choice for the future.

He could be impeached. And, if involved in the obstruction of justice, he should be. Impeachment may be a horrible thought, but it would not destroy the system. It was written into the Constitution to preserve the system.

Many Democrats fear impeachment because that means Mr. Agnew. Some don't like his probable policies; others, more cynical, reportedly want Mr. Nixon to kick around for three more years and do not want to face an incumbent Spiro Agnew in 1976. But fear of an Agnew Presidency is not sufficient rebuttal to the principles involved.

Alternatively, it all could be fuzzed over. The facts might simply never be known. Or, if the President only half knew about it, or only approved it in

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a very general way, most of the nation might be able simply to avert its eyes for the sake of the system. For this is where the "save the Presidency" argument can logically lead.

Rather than a cleansing of the system, this would be institutionalizing fraud. It would exacerbate exactly what's wrong with the Presidency right now. For many Americans, the tension between our view of the Presidency and our view of our Presidents is already acute. We want to believe in the Presidency as a symbol of honest leadership, yet we have learned to doubt much of what our Presidents tell us. Papering over Watergate would stretch faith past the breaking point.

What is at stake is the Administration of Richard Nixon, not the integrity of the White House itself. The final irony is that only by tying the two together on Watergate will we do irreparable harm to the institution of the Presidency and therefore to our system of government. Watergate need hurt the Presidency only if we insist it does.

Our political system could outlast even so appalling an event as impeachment. It could not survive the apathy of total cynicism.