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Watergate: Mr. Nixon Makes It Worse

On Tuesday the President suddenly issued (via Mr. Ziegler) a document of several thousand words seeking to clarify his role in the Watergate crime and cover-up and in the related squalors that have come to public attention. It is interesting—and it is also heartbreaking. For appalling as many of the revelations have been that have come to us through the press, the courts and the Ervin Committee hearings, none has provided so damning an indictment of the Nixon presidency as does Mr. Nixon's own attempt to defend it. The President's lengthy statement is—by turn—pathetic, unconvincing, confused. What emerges, however, is all too clear. If you take Mr. Nixon's explanations at face value, there emerges the picture of a kind of incompetence bordering on the criminally negligent, a failure of authority and responsibility and plain sense that all but defies belief.

Three years ago, Mr. Nixon tells us, in the face of what he regarded as grave security threats, he set up an interagency committee to work out — among other things—some "options for expanded intelligence operations." One "option" which was approved was described by the President as follows:

"authorization for surreptitious entry—breaking and entering, in effect—on specified categories of targets in specified situations related to national security."

But, the President tells us, he could not get the Director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, to go along with this burglary business or the rest of the plan. So approval of the "option" was rescinded. And Mr. Nixon, a while later, set up an Intelligence Evaluation Committee (whose activities he says he now understands to be "under investigation") and—a while after that—a special White House investigative group called the "plumbers" whose number included such sterling fellows as G. Gordon Liddy and E. Howard Hunt. The President assures us that if any of the above was up to any hanky panky (such as, for example, the kind approved and then disapproved at Mr. Hoover's insistence a while before), he didn't authorize it or know about it.

Well, what *did* he know about? And what *did* he think he authorized? A President sets up what are essentially domestic spying groups. They don't have their headquarters in Vienna or Prague: one group is ensconced in White House offices. Its minions come to work there every day—or at least when they are not out exercising an "option" somewhere. Did Mr. Nixon not understand that he had created a para-police unit that, *at the very least*, required strict supervision by him? And if the work of these groups, indeed their very creation and existence, had been mandated—as Mr. Nixon would have us believe—by extreme and momentous national security threats, are we to believe that the President more or less ignored their activities after he had set them up? According to Mr. Nixon, we are. That is what we mean when we say the President's statement constituted a worse indictment of his performance than has been made by any of the other evidence being invoked against him.

But that is not all. There is the question specifically of his response to the news of the Watergate break-in and the connection of plumbers Liddy and Hunt with it. Mr. Nixon was "alerted" that Howard Hunt had been part of the White House domestic spying squad. So when Mr. Hunt's name "surfaced" in connection with the crime, Mr. Nixon feared—he explains—that the investigation "might well lead to an inquiry into the activities of the Special Investigations Unit [plumbers] itself." And he also suspected that there might be a CIA connection—in fact, he was "advised" of such a possibility. So what does he do? Does he get in touch with CIA Director Helms and find out if there is such a connection? Does he inquire into exactly what the CIA might be doing in this area which clearly lies outside its statutory mandate? Does he rattle the china around at the White House or over at the re-election committee and demand to find out what is really going on? Not by his own account. Rather, Mr. Nixon tells us, he tried to get the investigators charged with bringing the Watergate criminals to book to tailor their investigation so as not to bring these other things out in the open. And now, finally, almost a year later, the President informs us that his information remains "fragmentary and to some extent contradictory."

Almost from the beginning of the current flood of Watergate disclosures, the public has been faced with a dreadful choice so far as the President's own role is concerned—namely, a choice between an assumption of staggering incompetence on the one hand and dissembling and complicity on the other. None of the President's statements has resolved the dilemma. Each has only raised the stakes, made either the folly or the knavery seem 10 times worse. And this is what Mr. Nixon's Tuesday declaration did too. Where it differed from the President's earlier public statements was in its special protective stress on national security. This deserves a special word.

Presidents of the United States, over the past couple of decades have been granted by the people considerable license to invoke national security needs as a justification for all manner of activities that otherwise would not be permitted and which certainly would not be permitted to go on in secrecy. This is an enormous trust, and from time to time, our Presidents have abused it. You could argue—and many people do—that President Johnson abused it in the course of escalating the American Vietnam involvement. But nobody argues that he abused it for small or personal or political reasons: the dissembling was undertaken, he believed, to fulfill a genuine, if unpopular, national security imperative abroad. Whether he was right or wrong, that is a distinction of some importance. For what we must reluctantly suspect now is not just that Mr. Nixon's campaign and government appointees abused the prerogatives of White House power, but that the President himself is invoking the sacred and serious national security claim frivolously and to ends for which it was never intended. Trust me, the President says. With every effort of his own to maintain such trust, he makes it harder.