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James Reston Reports

A 'Security' Blanket

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President Nixon's latest explanation of his part in the Watergate scandal — which is quite different from his first two explanations — is that everything he did, or failed to do, was motivated by his concern for "national security."

In his mind it is probably true, and this is precisely the problem. In fact, it is the main theme of his political life. Whenever he has been charged with dubious political or executive decisions, he has always justified them on the ground that, right or wrong, they were done in the name of "national security."

Analysis and Opinion

Does he have constitutional authority to bomb Cambodia in order to keep the Lon Nol government in power, or carry out the nation's commitments under the Southeast Asia Treaty, or try to compel North Vietnam to abide by the cease-fire agreement in Indochina? Congress questions that he does, but he bombs anyway in the name of "national security."

Was he fair in his savage attacks on Harry Truman and Dean Acheson, in questioning their motives in the Korean war? In his mind, he did it for "national security."

It is a very old Nixon story. He came into politics vilifying Helen Gahagan Douglas and Jerry Voorhees as "pinkos," and he wanted the U.S. to intervene in the French Indochina war at Dien Bien Phu, and he fought everybody who thought it might be possible to arrange an accommodation with Peking and Moscow — all for the same reason. He thought he was fighting for "national security."

More than that, he still feels he can use any blunt instruments at his command to serve his own notion of national security today. His last statement on the Watergate was not a satisfactory explanation, or even a credible alibi, but a confession of wrongdoing, of losing control over the FBI, of executive negligence, and even of presidential knowledge and approval of bugging and burglary — all in the name of "national security."

Assuming the best of motives, he thought, but his own testimony, that in the name of "national security," he could tap telephones, even of his own staff, authorize burglaries, ignore the disclosures of the press and the questions of the Congress, urge his staff to defend the "national interest" against its enemies, and then pretend to be surprised if they bugged the Watergate or raided Ellsberg's psychiatrist's files.

He asked for loyalty from his staff, and he got it. He had a chance to get campaign finance reform and he opposed it. After his spectacular victory last November, he had a chance for reconciliation with his old adversaries and he refused it.

After the facts began to come out on the Watergate scandal and he announced that he wanted all the facts to come out and that he was going to get at the bottom of the whole thing, he ducked direct questioning and put out what can only be called a mystifying clarification, which raised more questions than it answered.

What the nation obviously wanted and needed was a plain and honest statement of the facts from the President. What it has had from the President is one statement last August and one in October that he didn't know anything about the Watergate and nobody on his staff was involved, and then on April 17 of this year that maybe he had been misled by his own loyal public servants, and now, in summary, that he really did know a lot about the coverup but that it was done in the name of "national security," which must still limit the investigation in the Senate and the courts.

"In citing these national security matters," he said, "it is not my intention to place a national security 'cover' on Watergate, but rather to separate them out from Watergate. . . ."

But this is precisely what he is doing. He is failing the inquest. By his own testimony, he has created an atmosphere of fear, suspicion and hostility in the White House, which has infected not only the Haldemans and the Ehrlichmans and the Mitchells, but all the other minor characters in the tragedy.

"To the extent," the President said, "that I may in any way have contributed to the climate in which they (the illegal activities) took place, I did not intend to; to the extent that I failed to prevent them, I should have been more vigilant."

This is probably the most candid concession he has made in this whole tragedy, but he did not rest his case on this confession. He rested it, as he has done throughout his long and remarkable political career, on the proposition that, whatever he did was done for "national security."

And the tragedy is that more crimes and brutalities have been done in the name of "national security" in this country in the last quarter century than in the name of anything else, and Mr. Nixon is still falling back on this excuse, as he has done throughout his long career.