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. . . And the Way It Looks Today

The passage of time occasionally has its own point to make—as in, for instance, the Watergate affair. Today, on the anniversary of the arrest of five burglars in the Democratic National Committee headquarters at Watergate, we reprint our initial editorial reaction—which appeared four days after the event—for a variety of reasons. One is that in its attitudes and assumptions, which we believe were widely shared at the time, it offers a fairly clear measure of how far the nation has traveled in one year—from innocence to experience, as it were. Indeed, far from being "knowing" or cynical, the editorial now strikes us as being in certain respects naive and even quaint. Who could have believed, let alone inferred, the magnitude and shame of what was yet to be revealed?

None of this is to say that we did not also share a prevalent and understandable degree of skepticism concerning the official "explanations" of what went on or that we found the outright disavowal of connection with the burglars on the part of Mr. Nixon's campaign entourage wholly persuasive. The point is an important one. It was, from the beginning, an implausible series of denials—almost as implausible as the weird events it was meant to cover up. No one had to have a degree in law or be a trained logician to see the weak spots and blurs and improbabilities in the disavowals and in the professions of bafflement on the part of those who, in fact, turned out to be the burglars' patrons. How, then, could the President have failed to notice or to demand a proper accounting? How could he have accepted at face value the haughty and categorical disclaimers that were being made? Had he no more curiosity or acuity than that? Today, one full year and many compounded crimes later, the questions to which he should have demanded answers are finally being systematically asked. But they are being asked by others and with potential consequences far larger for the intervening year. Mr. Nixon, his administration, his party and the public as a whole have all been victims of this criminal default.

What we are talking about, then, is the might-have-been. What happened was far different. For looking back at our own initial response with a view to recapturing the mood and context of the moment, it seems plain to us that almost from the outset and for many months thereafter, these two elements—innocence and skepticism—were at war within many people. The cover story might be improbable. But was it not at least as improbable, if not much more so, that the highest officials of this government and its law enforcement officers would contrive to commit crimes? Would contrive to obstruct justice? Would systematically deny knowledge of events with which they were all too familiar? If disbelieving the White House version of events required believing in the possibility of all the things we now know, was it not understandable that people inclined to the White House view? We are back to one of our favorite phrases — a "presumption of regularity," which L. Patrick Gray, the recently resigned chief of the FBI, claimed he made in his dealings with the White House. So did most others. And the loss of the capacity to believe in a certain minimal degree of honor and restraint on the part of the highest officials in the land is one genuinely terrible effect of the Watergate saga. It was *Mission Incredible* after all—more incredible, in fact, than anyone could have supposed—except it turned out to be true.

We have one final thought on this conflict between belief and skepticism, and it is that the skeptics in this affair may save us yet. Ultimately the refusal of such men as Sam Ervin and Barry Goldwater and John Sirica and a host of others to be gulled or to be distracted, their insistence on getting at the truth—all this is what may restore public trust in government. To be sure, the pursuers of the facts have presented us with some shattering truths. But in the very act of doing so, and by virtue of it, they offered themselves in evidence that these things are not acceptable, that they transcend political or ideological affinities and that the nation as a whole is entitled to expect far better from its leaders.

By Bob Burchette—The Washington Post

Sen. Howard Baker (R-Tenn.), Sen Sam Ervin (D-N.C.) and Samuel Dash, chief counsel to the committee, confer privately during the Watergate hearings.