

Watergate One Year Later

By Tom Wicker

A year after the Washington police caught five burglars redhanded in the offices of the Democratic National Committee, the most burning questions in the public mind still seem to be: Did Richard Nixon know that the Watergate Five were hired hands of the Committee for the Re-election of the President? Did he help cover up the committee and White House involvement? Whatever he knew, how will it all turn out?

No definitive answers are available "at this point in time" to any of those questions. Yet, the Watergate affair already has had profound consequences, most of them fortunate for the nation, deriving from the pursuit of the truth by the Senate, the press and—after what appears to have been a reluctant start—the Department of Justice. That is the best answer to the question whether any or all of these investigators ought to continue their efforts.

In immediate practical terms, the most profound effect may have been upon the Justice Department. There, the amiable but overpolitical and confused L. Patrick Gray 3d has been replaced as F.B.I. director by Clarence M. Kelley, who appears at first glance to have most of the right qualifications; most important, the Kelley confirmation hearings seem likely to become a solid and needed inquiry into how the F.B.I. is organized and directed, its mission, its relationship to the White House, the Attorney General and Congress.

Not only has Richard Kleindienst been replaced by Elliot Richardson as Attorney General but the old Mitchell-Kleindienst attitudes may be rooted out as well. Just recently, Mr. Richardson said he would take a new look at the Kent State tragedy, which had

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been so cavalierly dismissed; the courts and the Watergate case have largely discredited the Mitchell-Kleindienst security-surveillance policies; and it may well be that the secret-police mentality that had infected the Justice Department since 1969 has been contained for years to come (that kind of mentality never can be banished forever).

The White House and its position within the Administration have undergone equally striking, if not quite so definable, changes. With the departure of the rigid, secretive and dictatorial Haldeman-Ehrlichman team, and the arrival amid the wreckage of Mel Laird and Bryce Harlow—as able and knowledgeable a pair of Republicans as there is—the President obviously will be less protected from bad news and dissent, more exposed to Congressional and other political pressures, further involved with the Administration's principal officers and departments, and far removed from the imperial solitude from which he once issued his ukases through the faithful H.&E.

That is probably all to the good; but it remains to be seen whether in a more open and collective Administration, Mr. Nixon will be able to move the bureaucracy effectively. In this term, he had planned to push his program through a "super-Cabinet" and by stringing a network of tough, young White House operatives—Krogh, Magruder, etc.—in high positions throughout the major departments. Those plans are victims of the Watergate, unmourned perhaps, but also unreplaced in the perfectly real struggle to manage an unwieldy Government.

Even less measurable is the loss Mr. Nixon is bound to have suffered in the tremendous political power that was his after the landslide election of 1972. Watergate and the courts again have combined to make him an apparent loser, for example, in the impoundment battle with Congress that he once seemed to be winning and in which there was much justice on his side. But the actual outcome of that struggle still may be a needed reform in Congressional appropriations procedures, a more important matter than any given year's budget.

Can Mr. Nixon manage, after Watergate, any kind of controversial legislative program? He is being forced already to retreat from his proposed revenue-sharing plan for the support of education. And whether or not his political troubles have diminished his Presidential authority in economic matters well may be a more important question than the substance of his Phase 4 actions.

As for the 1976 election, John Connally would hardly be leaving the White House so quickly after coming back to it if he thought being at Mr. Nixon's side would be advantageous in winning the Presidential nomination. On the other hand, Vice President Agnew has no ready means of dissociating himself from the President and the scandal, although he has not yet been implicated personally.

That Mr. Brezhnev is here this week is ample evidence, however, that Mr. Nixon has suffered least in his ability to manage foreign policy. After all, with whom can foreign leaders deal except a sitting President with his constitutional powers?

Beyond all these pros and cons, however, is the most important—perhaps not fully realized—effect of Watergate. It is that for the first time in decades, probably since Franklin Roosevelt's first Administration, "the President" is being seen by the generality of the American people as human, flawed, "one of us." Three cheers for that.