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A Response to a Nixon Defender

Colson at the Iceberg's Tip

By Tom Wicker
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ANYTHING CHARLES COLSON wants to happen immediately, it is safe to assume, would be good for (A) Richard Nixon and (B) Charles Colson, maybe even in that order. So let us look again at Colson's assertion last week that the most important thing in the Watergate matter is for "the American people to know immediately" whether Mr. Nixon was involved in the June 17, 1972, break-in at the Democratic National Committee offices and its subsequent coverup.

Of course, Colson insists Mr. Nixon was not so involved and appears to suggest that therefore the President can be absolved of any responsibility for matters now coming to light. This tricky approach is entirely worthy of Colson.

FOR ONE THING, even the single event of the June 17 break-in at the Democratic National Committee was not an obscure or short-lived episode. Suppose Mr. Nixon knew nothing of it before it happened; suppose that as late as the night of March 21, 1973, as Colson insisted, Mr. Nixon was complaining that "he was not being told the truth."

Accepting both assertions for the purposes of argument, Mr. Nixon had had by the latter date nine months to find out the truth — nine months for investigation by his own Justice Department, his own appointee as head of the FBI, his own legal counsel (as Mr. Nixon told the nation), his own staff; and nine months, too, of political charges, journalistic exposes, a federal court trial, and the initiation of two congressional investigations, one of them lobbied off the board by White House aides.

Yet, for those nine months, Colson would have us believe, the President of the United States — who has been repeatedly pictured as knowing "all the facts," more facts than anyone else, on Vietnam, Cambodia and all the trouble spots of the world — was kept from the truth under his own nose by the wily machinations of evil John W. Dean 3d.

If Richard Nixon in fact passed those nine months without learning, or strongly suspecting to the point of insisting on learning, that the break-in was the work of men hired in his name and on his behalf, then he did not want to know and there is a prima facie case of neglect of duty to be brought against him, with Charles Colson as a principal witness for the prosecution.

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THE JUNE 17 break-in, moreover, was only the tip of the iceberg. Try as Colson and others might to narrow the inquiry to the limited questions of whether Mr. Nixon knew of it in advance, and-or helped to cover it up afterwards, the rest of the iceberg is still there beneath the oily surface.

What about the Ellsberg break-in, the illegal wiretapping of reporters, the list of "enemies" to be "screwed," the forgery of tables, the secret police activities of the Liddy-Hunt "plumbers" group who were moved from Richard Nixon's White House to Richard Nixon's re-election committee, the attempts to pervert the FBI, the CIA, and the Internal Revenue Service into political henchmen of the Administration, Mr. Nixon's admitted approval of the infamous and illegal 1970 internal security plan and his participation in improper approaches to Judge Byrne during the Ellsberg trial?

Innocence of the June 17 break-in and its coverup is not necessarily innocence of these other offenses.

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NOR IS IT an acceptable defense, even if true, to say that the President knew nothing of any of this, or didn't understand its implications, or acted — in the case of the internal security plan — only to uphold "national security." What kind of security is there for anyone if the Chief Executive of the country is himself ordering burglaries to be committed?

If the highest national official, who is sworn to uphold the law, doesn't know that his own men are breaking the law, and is too inept to find out, or doesn't understand what lawbreaking is, he is palpably unfit for his office.

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EVEN IF they include Mr. Nixon, there are other, perhaps more important, aspects to the present crisis than individual guilt or innocence.

What structural weaknesses and political failures permitted the offenders to abuse powers supposedly checked and balanced, and to pervert laws and agencies to illicit purposes? What can be done, not just to punish the presently guilty, but to deter and tie the hands of those who might be tempted in the future?

These and other questions transcend the admittedly important matter of Richard Nixon's personal guilt or innocence. And even that question is far more than a matter of what he specifically knew about the June 17 break-in, before or after his agents pulled it off.

James Reston is on vacation