

'White House Horrors'

Out of John N. Mitchell's testimony has come the useful and all-purpose phrase: "White House horrors." It is a most appropriate label, not merely for the Watergate break-in and cover-up, but for the entire list of White House-sponsored illegal acts of political espionage and even broader violations of constitutionally guaranteed rights and liberties.

Even if it is ultimately established that Mr. Nixon had no personal knowledge of any or all of the horrors, or of their cover-up, he is the responsible authority at the White House. At the heart of the matter is the fact that the horrors have been committed, and that they emanated from the White House. Mr. Mitchell's defense of his alleged decision not to inform the President about the White House horrors has been that he considered Mr. Nixon's re-election of paramount importance and that, had the President been told of the plumbers' dirty work, he would have had to take actions and authorize disclosures that might have led to his defeat at the polls.

Such judgment as to what the President might have done or how the American people might have reacted is of course pure conjecture. What is truly alarming is that a palace guard could believe it was its right and duty to prevent the President from knowing what "horrors" have been committed in his name, in the fear that his action to halt the wrongdoing might hurt him in the hustings.

The question must ultimately be asked what might have happened had not the bungling of the White House horror crew, and subsequent pressure by courts and press, led to public exposure. Is there the slightest indication that those who claimed that they kept matters hushed up for the good of Mr. Nixon and his re-election would have come forward with the truth later on? The evidence so far is to the contrary. The cover-up continued and was intensified after the election; and the facts were not permitted to see the light of day until they either were forced into the open or were exposed by various participants in the affair as part of their personal defense.

There is increasingly persuasive evidence that, except for the Watergate bungle, the White House horrors would have continued to haunt the nation. Telephones would have continued to be tapped illegally. "Enemy" offices would have continued to be broken into. Political opponents would have continued to be sabotaged. The integrity of the F.B.I., the C.I.A., the Internal Revenue Service and other Government agencies would have continued to be undermined. Factions within the White House would have continued to spy on each other, with a view to enhancing their own secret powers.

These things are not figments of anybody's imagination. The White House horrors had come to pass; and the country was within an inch of not knowing that they might become the established routine of governmental power. In some measure, moreover, these horrors were spawned by the doctrine implied by the internal security plan of 1970 about which President Nixon did indeed know everything and which—after the late J. Edgar Hoover's refusal to cooperate—was superseded by the White House plumbers, again with the President's knowledge and approval.

Viewed in this perspective, the story of the White House horrors can no longer be treated as a tale of bungling political spies who happened to work in the White House. It contains instead all the elements of a horror story about a narrow escape from the kind of governmental power that must never again be allowed to emanate from the White House.