

The Charge of Ignorance

If the statements of President Nixon and his most loyal supporters are to be believed, the nation is entitled to be deeply concerned—not that the President knew so much about political espionage and its cover-up, but that he knew so little about it and, even worse, made such a patently meager effort to find out.

“On March 21, as a result of serious charges which came to my attention, . . . I began intensive new inquiries into this whole matter,” Mr. Nixon told the nation last April. But the very next day after he had opened his own investigation, March 22, the President met with the men most intimately engaged in the Watergate cover-up conspiracy and asked not a single question about what had gone on—so testified John N. Mitchell before the Senate Watergate hearings.

Nor did John D. Ehrlichman, the aide whom the President asked to make the new investigation, ever ask Mr. Mitchell for his knowledge of the affair, according to the former Attorney General's testimony. Is this what Mr. Nixon considers “intensive new inquiries”?

If we are to believe that Mr. Ehrlichman did not comprehend the nature of the Watergate cover-up, we must wonder about the quality of an Administration that allowed a man of such naiveté to function as the President's top domestic affairs adviser.

If we are to believe that H. R. Haldeman, despite all the memoranda which swirled around his desk, saw no evil, heard no evil and reported no evil to the President, then we must wonder about the quality of an Administration whose Presidential chief of staff was blind and deaf to the most serious allegations even after they were widely discussed throughout the country.

If we are to believe the former special White House counsel Charles W. Colson that President Nixon does not know “to this day” who ordered the Watergate break-in, then we must wonder about the quality of an Administration which, apparently incapable of controlling its own illegally created “plumbers,” has proved equally incapable of getting to the bottom of the plumbers' exploits. What else is going on so out-of-control by the responsible authorities?

The White House defense platoon is only convicting itself and its leader of incompetence, an incompetence too dangerous to be contemplated in comfort. If Mr. Nixon really knew and cared so little about what trusted men were doing in his shadow, there are two possible conclusions. One is that Mr. Nixon's political skill and sense of responsibility were inadequate to the demands of leading a powerful government. The more plausible conclusion is that Mr. Nixon simply did not want to know.