

By Tom Wicker

Every time it seems exhausted, the Watergate story develops some sensational new wrinkle that keeps the whole sordid mess alive. This week it was the disclosure that President Nixon had been recording virtually all his official conversations; so he presumably has the power to prove or disprove most charges against him.

But the omnipresence of Watergate may be obscuring the fact that, on most other serious counts, the Nixon Administration also is floundering in deep trouble. At least possibly, of course, that is because Watergate has everyone off balance and preoccupied, from Mr. Nixon on down. But to whatever degree the Administration's sins of omission and commission may be traceable to Watergate, they add up to a grave question mark about this Government's competence.

The announcement of Phase 4, for the most notable example, is nothing more nor less than an abject confession of the failure of Phase 3 and— even more so—of the emergency freeze that put Phase 3 to an ignominious death. Before that freeze, prices were rising at an intolerable annual rate of 9 per cent, a figure that graphically suggests how unwise and untimely it was for Mr. Nixon last Jan. 11, to relax the relatively effective Phase 2 controls. But after the price freeze, imposed June 13 in what appears to have been a moment of politics and panic, things degenerated further; as Mr. Nixon himself put it, "the freeze [was] holding down production and creating shortages which threaten to get worse."

Now we have Phase 4, which admittedly cannot reduce prices, particularly food prices, but which may, at best, slightly restrict the rate of increase; again in Mr. Nixon's own words, price increases will be "greater

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than anyone would like." Take the Phase 4 confession together with an unprecedented rate of inflation, an effective 20 per cent devaluation of the dollar, and interest rates at a near peak, and it can be seen that Mr. Nixon was only understating the case when he also said that "confidence in our management of our fiscal affairs is low, at home and abroad."

Confidence in Mr. Nixon's management of Southeast Asian affairs—the major preoccupation of American foreign policy for a decade—obviously is not much higher. Even though he claims to have achieved "peace with honor" in Vietnam, his efforts to fight on in Cambodia—for what, no one can explain—have caused what used to be a supine Congress to impose upon him an Aug. 15 deadline for the end of bombing attacks on that country's people.

Nor can American air operations in support of an American puppet regime in Cambodia be separated from the vigor with which Congress is pursuing war-powers legislation. Aside from dispute over the details of that legislation, differing versions of which have been passed in both Senate and House, Congress obviously is determined to put limits to Presidential imperialism of precisely the kind displayed by Mr. Nixon in his Cambodian policy.

Now it is being disclosed, moreover, that just as the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations launched clandestine war in Laos, in violation of even elementary responsibility to the electorate and to international law, the Nixon Administration launched secret war in Cambodia, and on a grandiose scale—more than 3,500 air attacks in 1969 and 1970, when pious lip service

was being paid to the principle of nonaggression and to the policy of "winding down the war."

Thus lying to the American people and the rest of the world—save the peasants on the other end of the bombing strikes—Mr. Nixon and his political aides got no more than they deserved if, as it now appears, their supposed military servants lied to them in the falsification of official reports concerning the secret Cambodian bombings. It still has to be asked: Who was in charge here?

The bombing itself, and its concealment from the public, is what really matters; yet, the forgery of documents, authorization for which no one now will admit, is apt enough comment on the ethical attitudes that permeate the American "national security establishment," or war machine, from the top down. Gen. Earle G. Wheeler said he would have authorized the falsification of documents had he been directly ordered to by President Nixon; think that over, Watergate fans.

The impoundment policy by which Mr. Nixon sought, at the beginning of his second term, to impose his spending priorities on Congress has been effectively rejected by the courts. The Foreign Relations Committee has refused to confirm his nominee for Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Southeast Asian Affairs, on the logical grounds that he was one of those who caused the mess in Southeast Asia. The Department of Justice has had to call in outside prosecutors from the Democratic party, owing to doubts of the department's integrity under Mr. Nixon. A Senate subcommittee has even dared slash Mr. Nixon's bloated request for funds to speed deployment of the Trident submarine, which no one could show to be needed.

In fact, it begins to look as if nobody is in charge here.