

Cover-Up

By William V. Shannon

The inner history of the Nixon Administration is a series of cover-ups because there is much to be concealed. The unifying fact beneath these cover-ups is the President's direct, personal relationship with the seamy side of his Administration. He is not the pre-occupied, innocent victim of his "overzealous" aides. The style of politics that the White House has played during these Nixon years is a style that he inspired, encouraged and approved.

When John Ehrlichman in April 1969, employed a retired New York City police detective to find out personal "dirt" about important Democratic politicians, he was not collecting that material because he is a political voyeur. He was trying to please the boss.

When Charles Colson in the 1970 campaign "leaked" embarrassing information to Life magazine about former Senator Joseph Tydings' financial investments, he was not conducting a private vendetta. He was playing politics in the way he knew Mr. Nixon wanted it played.

When high Administration officials arranged favorable settlements of the I.T.T. case and other antitrust cases, they knew they were following the President's policy of using Government power to help the Administration's friends in private industry.

Watergate is a messy, sprawling story that seems to lead everywhere because Richard Nixon's influence was naturally everywhere throughout his Administration. Stated another way, Watergate is not a self-contained scandal; it is the concealed soft underbelly of this regime.

The President is in deep trouble today because the irregular methods and the habit of concealment were so endemic in his Administration that when the Watergate burglars were caught, a conspiracy to obstruct justice was immediately organized.

Such a conspiracy was almost inevitable because a thorough inquiry would lead to the President's campaign manager who allegedly approved the burglary, his finance chairman who financed it and his chief of staff—H. R. Haldeman—who received copies of the information gained in the previous burglary and wiretap operation, the "Gemstone" papers.

When the Watergate burglars were arrested, it was the President himself who used the C.I.A. ploy to deflect the investigation. It was the President who arranged for John Mitchell's nominal resignation as his campaign manager, "nominal" inasmuch as the Senate Watergate committee by ana-

lyzing Mr. Mitchell's appointment calendar proved that he saw just as many campaign officials in the three months after he quit as he did in the three prior months. He did not resign to spend more time with Martha.

The Mitchell resignation and the C.I.A. ploy were the initial moves in what may be termed the first Watergate cover-up. Equally significant are Mr. Nixon's actions as that cover-up began to fall apart in March and April.

The crisis began on March 21 when John Dean warned the President that the scandal could no longer be contained. If the President's defense is to be plausible, he must show that he had been innocent of knowledge until then but on that date, "I launched an intensive effort of my own to get the facts."

What did this intensive effort consist of? The President now says that he first entrusted the task of getting the facts to Mr. Dean. But why would he turn for yet another report to the very man who, according to Mr. Nixon's own account, was responsible for all the untrue reports he had been receiving for more than nine months?

The President then goes on to say that when Mr. Dean failed to produce a report, he turned to John Ehrlichman and to Attorney General Richard Kleindienst. But Mr. Ehrlichman, already the object of a blackmail effort by E. Howard Hunt, one of the convicted Watergate defendants, could hardly be a disinterested investigator. Even worse, Mr. Kleindienst has testified that he received no special instructions from the President between March 21 and April 14. In short, the President's explanation of what he did in those three weeks lacks credibility.

Even more provocative is what Mr. Nixon did after April 15. Henry Petersen, Assistant Attorney General, has testified that on that day he warned the President that Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Ehrlichman might be criminally prosecuted and that he should "get rid of them immediately." Mr. Petersen further advised him not to fire Mr. Dean because that would create the impression that the President would punish anyone who cooperated with the prosecutors.

What did the President do? He promptly asked Mr. Dean for his resignation. He directed Mr. Haldeman to review the tape of the crucial conversation of March 21. Those two moves do not prove, but they suggest, that the President had decided to make John Dean the scapegoat and to hang tight with the rest of the insiders in the conspiracy. If so, the second Watergate cover-up had begun. It is that cover-up which the public rightly fears may still be in operation.