

The saddest side-effect of Watergate across American society is the degree to which respect for the processes of government has been tarnished. Many Americans of younger and older generations alike have grown cynical about the way politicians—any politicians, of either party—are presumed to operate once they ascend to power. In a poignant moment of the Senate Watergate hearings, a sobered Gordon Strachan advised young people interested in political life to “stay away.”

To this President Nixon gave a blunt retort in his televised address on Aug. 15: “I reject the cynical view that politics is inevitably or even usually dirty business.” We do too. It is deeply unfortunate, in the light of this forthright statement, that the President keeps invoking, as if to defend all the trespasses of his Administration, vague and undocumented charges that American Presidents before him had also authorized the illegal use of state power against American citizens, that his predecessors had acquiesced in trampling on the Bill of Rights just as much as Mr. Nixon’s own “plumbers.”

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Questioned by newsmen in San Clemente this week about the burglary of the office of Dr. Daniel Ellsberg’s psychiatrist, President Nixon replied: “In the three Kennedy years and the three Johnson years through 1966, when burglaries of this type did take place, when it was authorized on a very large scale, there was no talk of impeachment and it was quite well known.”

It is hard to imagine any Presidential statement more calculated to undermine public confidence in the integrity of government than this blunderbuss intimation, unsupported by any evidence, that Mr. Nixon’s predecessors issued orders wholesale for burglaries in the name of “national security.”

Two Attorney Generals under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson have forcefully denied knowledge of any White House authorized burglaries, for “national security” or other reasons. There clearly were such operations by the Federal Bureau of Investigation over a period of three decades, but all the available indications are that these were made under orders from the late J. Edgar Hoover and not with the concurrence or authorization of any President of the United States. Challenged to back up the President’s suggestion that he was simply perpetuating a time-honored executive practice of sending undercover agents on illegal break-and entry missions, Mr. Nixon’s spokesmen refuse to provide any documentation. In their view, a Presidential assertion of “fact” is all the proof the country needs.

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The vehemence with which Mr. Nixon sought throughout his news conference to excuse away the Watergate excesses by hinting that the precedents on wiretapping as well as burglaries had been set by the Democrats before him was a depressing throwback to the implication in his first televised defense last April 30 that Watergate was nothing special because, in his words, “both of our great parties have been guilty of such tactics in the past.”

That is supposedly the view he repudiated in his Aug. 15 rejection of the notion that politics and dirty tricks are merely two ways of saying the same thing. Too much of what the President is still saying about Watergate seems designed to reinforce those cynics who insist that the only thing the Watergate plotters did wrong was to get caught.

It does little good for the President to deplore all the illegalities that have so dismayed the country and shaken confidence in government if he accompanies each denunciation with unsupported references to a general climate of irresponsibility among his predecessors. If Watergate is to have a cleansing effect on American politics and the Presidency, as Mr. Nixon says he hopes it will, the first step is to stop minimizing the misdeeds currently under investigation by fostering the dismal view that such things were going on all the time.