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Paying Attention to Watergate

Because the public memory can be so distressingly short, a few reminders may be in order:

1. The fact that Spiro Agnew has resigned does not mean that the country is out of the woods of scandal.

2. The fact that the recent revelations of the Senate Watergate Committee are less startling than some of the earlier ones does not mean that the case against the Administration is weaker than it used to be.

3. The fact that the public mind has latched onto the White House tapes as the crucial evidence as to presidential culpability does not mean that there is no case against the President without the tapes.

It's awfully hard to give adequate attention to more than one scandal at a time, and for so long as Agnew's troubles were on the front pages, because dramatic things were happening, it was easy to forget about Watergate.

But just because the Agnew case was so dramatic, it will be tempting now that it is over to breathe a big sigh of relief, choose a new Vice President and consider the Union saved. It is a temptation that ought to be resisted. The nation's real interest lies in turning full attention to the main attraction—Nixon and Watergate—now that they have closed the "side-show," as Herblock put it last week.

But even apart from the intervention of the Agnew scandal, there is something disturbing about the way the Watergate investigation—the Senate's public investigation, at least—is going. Because it started off on television, it had a lot of us reacting as to a TV show: We expected each new

revelation to lead us inexorably toward the denouement.

We knew enough about drama to know that there would be slow periods, to emphasize the fast ones—a matter of pace. But in general, we let ourselves expect a build-up of suspense, an occasional red herring, another major piece of the puzzle, and then—Aha!

That's TV. Life doesn't always unfold that way. In the case of Nixon and Watergate, the big pieces of the puzzle fell in fairly early and we were left with the solution somewhere in Act I. We're now in Act II, and we're confused.

We're confused because in TV drama, we learn to reject any answer that appears too early in the play. We're accustomed to having the solution at the end. And since the Watergate is still unfolding, we imagine that the denouement is yet to come.

It may be necessary to the committee's work to tie the last of the loose ends together: the dirty tricks, both the illegal ones and those that were only immoral. But then it will be necessary for Sam Ervin and Co. to make their summation, to tell us what we've learned (and perhaps forgotten) during the months of hearings.

Let them remind us that we're supposed to believe that President Nixon knew nothing of the burglaries committed, promises made, lies told and funds illegally collected in his name and on his behalf.

Let them remind us that we're expected to believe that John Mitchell, who had served the President as his chief legal officer, campaign chief, friend and confidant, knew, by his own account, that some campaign of-

ficials were planning something like the Watergate break-in; that the break-in occurred; that Mitchell subsequently resigned as campaign director, and that Mitchell never told the President—and the President never asked—what he knew about what was going on.

Let them remind us of the mindset of the men Richard Nixon chose to be his top advisors, of their cavalier attitude toward such things as subverting government agencies, burglarizing doctors' offices, circulating enemy lists and making illegal wire taps in the name of "national security."

Let them remind us that the only conceivable way the President could have remained ignorant of all these things was by choosing to remain ignorant, and remind us, too, that John Dean, who has reason to know, says he wasn't so ignorant after all.

Let them remind us that it is not only inconceivable that the President was unaware of the cover-up but that, by his own account, he ordered strict limitations on the official investigation into his own "plumbers" role in the affair. He did so, he said, to avoid revealing the "national security" work the plumbers were involved in. But that statement is the only evidence that they were involved in any national security work whatever.

And finally, let the Ervin committee or somebody remind us that all these things were established long before we even knew of the existence of the tapes. The tapes may be helpful in the case against Richard Nixon, but we shouldn't kid ourselves that they are vital.