

Watergate 'Story'



Joseph Kraft

THE WATERGATE "story" has swollen to the point of dwarfing the event itself. But, believe it or not, there really was a break-in and an attempted bugging of the Democratic National Committee.

Unanswered questions of no small import arose from that event. So the continued recurrence of Watergate stories is not merely a publicity gimmick, or media hype, but an example of how the press and television work in a free society.

I am impelled to make those observations by the flood of Watergate stories that suddenly appeared over the weekend. The occasion was the debut, this week, of the series of four interviews being done with former President Richard M. Nixon by British television journalist and producer David Frost.

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BEFORE going further I must say that I have known Frost for many years. I helped him a bit in recruiting researchers for the Nixon interviews, and I saw some of the early exchanges.

My strong impression is that the Frost endeavor has been a serious effort to develop a full picture of the Nixon presidency, including warts. One of Frost's research assistants, Robert Zelnick, did an extraordinary job of bringing together the vast corpus of foreign policy actions undertaken by the Nixon administration, and the curiously slim record in domestic policy.

Another assistant, James Reston Jr., did an equally fine job in summarizing and identifying for questions the major issues in Watergate. In the course of his work, Reston developed previously unpublished information on several White House tapes.

In particular he learned of a conversation between Nixon and a White House politico, Charles Colson, on June 20, 1972, three days after the arrest of the Watergate burglars. The tapes seemed to show that Nixon knew of the break-in at least within a few days of the event, and perhaps before.

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INEVITABLY the course of the Frost interviews moved from very low to very high gear. At the outset Frost was chiefly concerned to get a feel for his man. Thus in the first interview, Frost let Nixon run on for 23 minutes in response to a question about why he hadn't destroyed the tapes. But having begun at a relaxed pace, the process led to a sharpening and tightening of questions, ending up in genuine confrontation in the final sessions on Watergate.

There remain the major questions of why the Watergate break-ins occurred at all, of what information was being sought, and on whose behalf. As long as those questions abide, some hard-working and tenacious journalists will be pushing to learn more.