

A Sick Feeling We've Been Here Before

Washington.

FRIENDS of Ronald Reagan knew the meaning of nightmares Tuesday night. In their dreams they experienced a sickening sense of terrible times remembered, of a Senate select committee, of criminal trials and impeachment hearings, of a question that took on a life of its own: What did the president know, and when did he know it?

The Iranian imbroglio cannot fairly be equated with the Watergate scandals of 1972 — not yet, anyhow. Watergate involved the crime

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of burglary. We do not yet know what crimes, if any, may have been committed in the bizarre shell game that was played with Israel and Iran.

But there are similarities, and these are bound to disturb the White House sleep. Richard Nixon had his Gordon Liddy, mastermind of the break-in at Democratic National Headquarters. Ronald Reagan has his Oliver North, apparent mastermind of the Iranian operation. Colonel North is no burglar. He has a fine reputation as a loyal officer in the Marine Corps, but what did he do and who authorized him to do it?

On the Wednesday morning after the Tuesday massacre, the memories and lessons of Watergate come vividly to mind. Mr. Nixon himself never authorized the burglary. I am certain that Mr. Reagan never authorized the clandestine scheme that saw millions of dollars transferred to the "contras" of Nicaragua. In the Watergate affair, Attorney General John Mitchell weakly gave Mr. Liddy a free hand. Who served as John Mitchell to Colonel North?

The scandal of Watergate was not the break-in itself. The scandal came with Mr. Nixon's effort to conceal other criminal operations by his White House "plumbers." The scandal was obstruction of justice. The scandal was lying.

Since the Iranian story broke three weeks ago, the White House has been engaged in damage control.

The effort hasn't worked. Time after time reporters questioned chief of staff Donald Regan and Vice Adm. John Poindexter, the now ousted national security adviser. We left these briefings as if we had left a Chinese dinner — nice, but not filling.

This won't do. It simply will not do. On Tuesday the president named his own investigating board. It will be composed of honorable men, but these will be the president's men. Much more is required. The country rightfully may demand the equivalent of the Senate's select committee on Watergate. We need another Sam Ervin, another Howard Baker.

Unfortunately, no such committee could readily be constituted now. The 99th Congress has adjourned; the 100th Congress cannot be convened until Jan. 6. If a special committee were to be created, it would need subpoena powers; it would need staff and an appropriation. An investigation must be conducted comprehensively. Existing congress-

sional committees can do at best a piecemeal job in this pre-Christmas period. The Washington press corps, slaving over the juiciest story in 14 years, will hold a journalistic bucket for any leaks it can catch, but unattributed revelations in the press are a poor substitute for public testimony under oath.

A hundred questions press for answers. On this Wednesday morning it seems inconceivable that Robin and Batman could have acted alone. No one will believe it. Who provided the complaisant wink, the encouraging nudge? Where was Sec-

retary of State Shultz when the lights went out? Where was William Casey, director of the CIA? Where were the joint chiefs of staff, the vice president, the secretary of defense? Was everybody in the dark? Everybody?

Maybe so, but if so, the inescapable conclusion will pain the president's friends. If the president cannot be charged with complicity, he

will stand charged with incompetence. It was his responsibility to establish such controls that Colonel North and Admiral Poindexter would have found it unthinkable to go barging off on their own. Donald Regan's poor analogy, that bank presidents can't be expected to keep tabs on bank tellers, will not wash. This basement plot was hatched almost literally under the president's nose.

"The Watergate affair," said the Senate committee 12 years ago, "reflects an alarming indifference displayed by some in high public office or position to concepts of morality and trust. Indeed, the conduct of many Watergate participants seems grounded on the belief that the ends justified the means, that the laws could be flouted . . ."

Something of that sort may have happened here. At the moment we do not know what happened. We have to have the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and we have to have it soon.



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