



F Post 9/19/73
**The President
And The Pulpit**

By David Poling

In his August statement on Watergate, President Nixon excused some of his overzealous and misguided associates for their criminal actions — they were only responding to a higher loyalty not unlike the civil disobedience that had been preached from American pulpits during the war in Southeast Asia.

The President indicated that clergymen like William Sloan Coffin Jr. of Yale, the Berrigan brothers, Eugene Carson Blake of the World Council of Churches and Robert McAfee Brown were morally responsible for the illegal plots, the Watergate break-in, the White House "plumbers" — nearly two-dozen individuals closely associated with this administration. These are serious charges and mark the second time in six years that Mr. Nixon has faulted the clergy for the failures of other people.

In October of 1967, Richard Nixon wrote in Reader's Digest: "Our teachers, preachers and politicians have gone too far in advocating the idea that each individual should determine what laws are good and what laws are bad, and that he then should obey the law he likes and disobey the law he dislikes." At that time the ashes of Watts and Newark and Detroit were still warm, and the major antiwar demonstrations sweeping campus and city alike.

Now Mr. Nixon equates the actions of his former associates and advisers as being on the same moral plane and level, similar to that taken by religious leaders who opposed the war and preached civil disobedience. The comparison is unfair to the churchmen for three reasons:

1. Every action taken by militant antiwar spokesmen (such as Blake, the Berrigans, and Coffin) was done in public, in full view of the world. The White House clique sought absolute secrecy, their actions hidden and when found out, tried to cover it up with further lying and conspiracy. The leading churchmen mentioned had nothing to hide, they were not ashamed of their stand.

2. The militant clergymen operated within a larger community, and were in constant dialogue with those who supported and those who resented their position. The White House aides and employees did everything possible to remain hidden, operating with elaborate codes, pursuing goals that were injurious to community and the public they should have served.

3. The antiwar clergy took the consequences of fines, arrest, imprisonment and personal injury where their cause failed. The White House agents used (and are using) every device possible to avoid detection — and now investigation and conviction.

It appears that the pulpit is next to the press on the President's list of adversaries. That is unfortunate, for each must live with the other. For more than five years the White House has refused to receive the official leaders of the major religious bodies. And keeping the clergy at a distance, the President continues to blame them for the moral failures of his administration.