

Post
George F. Will

7/13/73
Operation
'I'm Not
A Crook'

On Monday morning many newspapers carried a picture of Vice President Gerald Ford striding from his car into a television studio, accompanied by a Secret Service agent. It was drizzling when the picture was taken, and Mr. Ford was under an umbrella. And the Secret Service agent was carrying the umbrella.

Here we go again.

A nice, unpretentious man from Grand Rapids, Michigan, gets appointed with executive power and—presto!—suddenly there are servants to carry his umbrella.

Don't look now, but we've got an "imperial Vice Presidency." It may all be a lot of warm spit, but it is in a gilded bucket.

The point is not just that we do not pay Secret Service agents to serve politicians as butlers and footmen. The point is the symbolism of such fawn-

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ing. Appearances matter, and the last thing we need today—or ever—is yet another politician adopting habits inconsistent with the elusive republican virtues of simplicity and humility.

These thoughts intrude while considering Mr. Nixon's "private" financial affairs.

For months, Mr. Nixon bitterly resisted "full disclosure" because he thought he should enjoy the ordinary citizen's right to keep his "private" affairs private. For a number of reasons, this always was absurd.

First, he has spent a long career laboring to "rise"—if that is the word—from private citizen to public official. Along with the 75 servants, 21 maintenance workers, five 707s, 11 jetstars, 16 helicopters, and other perks of office comes a certain diminution of the

right to operate privately.

Second, because he loaded the White House with assorted miscreants, there has been good reason to suspect him; as we would not suspect the average private citizen, of being casual about propriety.

Third, he is notably selective about when and how he wants to be treated like an ordinary citizen. Private citizens do not get deductions for their "private" papers. And when private

citizens have tax problems to resolve, they usually resolve them in court. They do not send them to a congressional committee.

Finally, and most important, there is nothing very "private" about the enterprise Mr. Nixon showed in tripling his net worth while in office. The loophole Mr. Nixon scrambled to exploit before it was repealed—the one allowing him a tax deduction of \$576,000 for giving his vice presidential papers to the government—permitted a public official to take a whopping deduction on papers generated in the performance of public duties the public had paid him to perform.

And about that extra \$89,000 Mr. Nixon pocketed as income. It was "left over" from the \$50,000 "expense" money he received each year of his first term for "defraying expenses relating to or resulting from the discharge of his official duties." It costs the American people a tidy sum to fly Tricia around in government aircraft, and to enable Ron Ziegler to go by military helicopter from San Clemente to a party in Hollywood, but nimble bookkeeping enables Mr. Nixon to pocket \$89,000 because it is not needed to defray the costs of his White House.

All this is unseemly, but legal, which is an encouraging departure from White House practice.

The "full disclosure" has slain some rumors (e.g., about a secret Nixon portfolio) that probably were not widely noticed outside Washington. But the silver bullets Mr. Nixon slew the rumors with are facts which most taxpayers understand and disapprove.

It is now a certified fact that Mr. Nixon has prospered by exploiting loopholes large enough to drive that \$500,000 presidential limousine through. Indeed, only Presidents or Vice Presidents can drive through them.

The financial disclosure teaches what everything called "Watergate" teaches. Mr. Nixon believes that everything not explicitly forbidden by law is permissible. Indeed, the silence of the laws is an incitement to him.

Although he can spot a loophole at 100 paces, a battalion of Indian scouts could not teach him to find the yawning gap between behavior which is merely legal and that which is proper for leaders.

It is a measure of the man and his men that the White House is proud of the documents disclosed. It is a measure of the quality of public life in Mr. Nixon's Washington that the documents can pass for good news.

"Operation Candor" has been transmogrified into "Operation 'I'm Not A Crook.'" Never has a President measured himself by a less demanding standard, but it refutes those who say Mr. Nixon has no standards.