

CRAZIES BY THE TAIL: Bay of Pigs, Diem, and Liddy

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by James Fallows

P... Well who was the asshole that did? Is it Liddy? Is that the fellow? He must be a little nuts!

H He is.

P I mean he just isn't well screwed on is he? Is that the problem?

June 23, 1972

A few weeks after the White House transcripts were released, *The New Yorker* invited several dozen prominent figures to report their reactions. Joseph Califano, who had been Lyndon Johnson's assistant for domestic affairs, said, "The contrast with the Johnson White House is enormous. I think it's an utterly amoral discussion.... It really is a group of amoral people saving their own skins." Arthur Schlesinger, the in-house historian of the Kennedy years, said, "Nixon was always proud of his historic firsts, and this beats all his predecessors in sleaziness."

As befits men whose own administrations have passed the torch to the leaders of today, Schlesinger and Califano are modest about the legacy their presidents created for Richard Nixon. The President himself, in his famous "Lyndon Johnson's Words to Me" speech, has been less restrained about his predecessor's contribution to his own thought about presidential papers and the IRS code. In the interest of historical fairness, one should also mention Dwight D. Eisenhower's efforts in this direction; years ago, Nixon observed first-hand the way a special congressional tax break on the royalties from *Crusade in*

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Europe made the General a wealthy man.

The modesty of the Schlesingers and Califanos, attractive as it may be, has had the lamentable side effect of contributing to a gap in Watergate scholarship—the neglected study of those great presidential traditions Richard Nixon carried forward. In his understandable eagerness to be "first" in as many fields as possible, Nixon, himself, has sometimes slighted the contributions of the past. When the national security wiretaps started to make headlines, who was there to remind us of the Kennedys' seminal work in this field, the Martin Luther King Internal Security Taps? Patrick Buchanan and his associates made a few stabs in this direction, but even they have overlooked many items. When Herbert Kalmbach went to jail for "selling ambassadorships," how many remembered that one in seven of John Kennedy's major appointments in 1960 went to a person who had given at least \$500 to the Kennedy campaign, or that the same one-in-seven ratio held for Lyndon Johnson's major appointments in 1964?*

Nor was Nixon the first president to forge links between the party treasury and the American business com-

*The \$500 figure is really an iceberg's tip, for until the last few years a sort of "honor code" among candidates, contributors, and the press facilitated drastic under-reporting of contributions. That makes the following figures for Kennedy appointees the more impressive: Harold Linder, \$12,600, appointed director of the Import-Export Bank; Hickman Price, \$5,000, Assistant Secretary of Commerce; John Rice, \$5,000, ambassador to The Netherlands; Angier Biddle Duke, \$4,250, chief of protocol; and John Gleason,

munity. For distribution at the 1964 convention, the Democratic National Committee prepared a 96-page "program" and sold space in it for \$15,000 a page. Both parties had used programs before as a means of generating money; the difference this time was the scale. Twenty-seven major defense contractors took space, as did 16 trucking firms. Far from being considered illegal corporate gifts, these advertising costs were tax deductible as legitimate business expenses.

The history of antitrust settlement had also been overlooked. Nixon's ITT case was hailed as a major departure, in disregard of Lyndon Johnson's precedent. On June 17, 1966, less than a month after August A. Busch and two of his employees had contributed \$10,000 to Johnson's "President's Club," the Justice Department decided to drop an antitrust suit against the Anheuser-Busch brewing corporation. Two Republican Congressmen, Gerald Ford and Charles Goodell, began complaining about the decision late in July; before that time, but after the June decision, Vice President Humphrey and the head of the antitrust division of the Justice Department, Donald Turner, had taken a ride to St. Louis in Busch's private plane to watch the

Jr., \$2,500, director of the Veterans Administration. Among the Johnson appointees: Raymond Guest, \$11,000, ambassador to Ireland; Roger Stevens, \$18,000, chairman of the National Council on the Arts; George Feldman, \$5,000, ambassador to Malta; Ed Clark, an old friend of LBJ's, \$3,000, ambassador to Australia; Harold Linder once more, \$61,000; another repeater, Angier Biddle Duke, who gave \$5,460 and was appointed ambassador to Spain.

All-Star game in Busch stadium. Ford Goodell stopped short of calling the deal corrupt, but as Ford said at the point, "the linking of political contributions and dismissal of antitrust suits was too much of a coincidence to be ignored."

Even the procurement of extra emoluments for the President's personal enjoyment which Richard Nixon has not exactly been blazing a new trail. In provisions for Clemente for his post-presidential reflection, the President was working in the mold of The Good Neighbor, who carefully prepared for his ten years at his farm in Gettysburg. The farm itself was something of a grant emolument; one time, after the snow had made a speech lamenting the loss of American gumption, Morse took the Senate floor and pointed out that most of the general stock, furnishings, and accessories of the farm had been gifts from "representing large private interests."

Lyndon Johnson's ascent to financial security was just as much a Horatio Alger story as Eisenhower's. LBJ entered the life a man of modest means and retired, after earning no more than \$24,000 per year in the Congress and \$100,000 as President, worth tens of millions of dollars. The details of this miraculous rise may unfortunately be lost to history. They were spelled out with precision and some venom in J. Evetts Haley's book, *A Texan Looks at Lyndon*. Although the book was a best-seller in the Southern California of my youth, neither libraries nor respectable bookstores seem to stock

it any longer. But it is clear, even without Haley, that the Johnson broadcasting stations in Texas, fortunate in obtaining government licenses, were the main element in his success. And even now Lyndon's good fortune persists. Just last March it was revealed that, as part of a bargain struck before LBJ left the White House, the Associated Milk Producers has been paying the Johnson family corporation \$94,000 per year for the "use" of a 13-seat plane bought by the milkmen and based at the LBJ ranch.

So there is a breath of truth in the old Nixon-loyalist line, "They all do it, he just got caught," and in Pat Buchanan's comments about excessive piety among those who denounce the President. The breath of truth is that Nixon's offenses lie along the same line as those of his predecessors. Of course they are so far out over the horizon on that line that they constitute a grotesque exaggeration of what went on before, as well as making the case for impeachment. But this difference in degree should not blind us to the similarity in kind between the Nixon offenses and those of Kennedy and Johnson. Another way to see the similarity is to compare Nixon's Watergate with the two major failures of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, the Vietnam decisions and the Bay of Pigs. There are surprising parallels among the states of mind that drew all three presidents into the mire.

1. A Crazy by the Tail

Even the worst account of Richard Nixon's character rarely contends that Nixon personally ordered Gordon Liddy and the burglars into the Watergate Hotel. Indeed, the White House evidence makes it clear that those who knew Liddy alternated between hilarity and terror at his James Bond posturings, while Magruder and Mitchell who were "responsible" for him in the CRP chain of command, were appalled by his

grandiose espionage plans.

All this meant that, when Liddy and the Cubans were arrested, the response from the higher-ups was slightly different than it would have been if a hand-picked crew with signed orders from the President in their pocket had been caught. In his recent book, Magruder describes the scene on June 18, when Liddy phoned him in California with the news:

"Liddy, what the hell was McCord doing inside the Watergate?" I demanded. "You were supposed to keep this operation removed from us. Have you lost your mind?"...

I didn't know what to tell Liddy. The situation was beyond my comprehension. I only knew that McCord's arrest was a disaster, because he was the CRP's security chief. . . .

"Oh, God," I moaned. "Why didn't I fire that idiot Liddy when I had the chance? How could we have been so stupid?"

So from the first, Magruder felt that "we" may have been stupid (for hiring someone like Liddy) but it was "you" and "they," that idiot Liddy and his burglars, who really messed things up. All the "responsible" people knew that *they* would never have created such a nightmare; but the madman allies had, and now that it had happened, they had no choice but to do their best to cope. It was a stupid situation, and someone else was really to blame, but all you could do now was to try to clean it up.

If they had it to do over again, everyone except possibly Liddy would probably prefer to have come clean from the start. At the time, however, that was a course of many perils. Largest of those perils was, of course, the upcoming election (as John Dean told the President on March 21, "We decided there was no price too high to pay to let this thing blow up before the election"), but another great impediment was the band of spooks. Who could tell what would happen if everyone started telling the truth? Liddy and Hunt might feel obliged to talk about Daniel Ellsberg and Dr.

Fielding, the Cubans would say something about "national security" and implied orders from the White House, and (this was Magruder's fear) Liddy would start thinking about shooting Magruder. And so the cover-up began, an unpleasant duty imposed on reasonable men by a bunch of nuts.

A Disposal Problem

While there is no obvious parallel in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations to this sort of in-house criminality, the same messy, unpleasant situations did occur. The Bay of Pigs is the clearest illustration, for it involved not only the clandestine "operating" arm of the CIA, which was the Hunt and Liddy of its day, but also the Cuban freedom fighters the CIA had trained. On arrival in the White House, John Kennedy was confronted with Allen Dulles' fool-proof plan for liberating the Cuban populace. Dulles' imprimatur was formidable in itself; during the 1950s John Foster Dulles had trusted his brother's CIA more than he had trusted his own men in State, and that, combined with the agency's highbrow recruits, gave it an influence it does not know today.

During the Bay of Pigs deliberations, John Kennedy several times broke through the CIA's arguments and was ready to cancel the plans. But each time he did, Allen Dulles helpfully reminded him of the plain fact that he was stuck with the Cuban freedom fighters. As Arthur Schlesinger says in *A Thousand Days*:

"The determination to keep the scheme alive sprang in part, I believe, from the embarrassment of calling it off. As Dulles said at the March 11 meeting, 'Don't forget that we have a disposal problem. If we have to take these men out of Guatemala, we will have to transfer them to the United States, and we can't have them wandering around the country telling everyone what they have been doing.' What could we do with this mass of

not send it on to Cuba... of Liddys on their hands, and had to do something. Kennedy learned many lessons from the Bay of Pigs, but even before the invasion had disappeared from the headlines, he was confronted with a similar situation demanding short-run solutions. In Vietnam, the U. S. was lining up behind the type of allies that no President, let alone one as sensitive to the practicalities of winning as Kennedy, would have willingly chosen. The Pentagon Papers were filled with slighting references to Dinh Diem and the leaders who succeeded him. To take one example of many, General Maxwell Taylor's report of November, 1961, has a special section to "the disposal problem of Diem as an administrator and politician." When Lyndon Johnson finished calling Diem the "American Churchill

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of Asia," he told Stanley Karnow, "Shit, man, he's the only boy we got out there."

In its way, this attitude could help American officials rationalize some of the early deceptions: we were just trying to cope with this joke government we've got in Saigon, and besides, Kennedy was going to pull the troops out after the 1964 election anyway. In his new book, *The Glory and the Dream*, William Manchester suggests that the first monumental deceit of the war was also a by-product of the we're-stuck-with-these-guys mentality.

During the Kennedy years, the American idea in Vietnam had been to beat those resourceful guerrillas at their own game. Were they sneaking down from the North, roaming the land by night and hiding among protective villages during the day? Then we would turn the tables, ship "our" guerrillas from South Vietnam into the North and let them do the job in the same cool, tough-minded way as the other side.

The plan for doing all this was called 34A, and it was not finally put into action until after Kennedy's assassination. In late 1963 and early 1964, South Vietnamese PT boats shipped squads of guerrillas to the North, where they were to install themselves among the people and do what the other side's guerrillas were doing in the South. It all went fine except for one thing: no one in the North liked our guerrillas, and every shipment of them was betrayed and eradicated.

So 34A was a disaster; as of that moment, our participation in the war was deprived of its original rationale. But instead of admitting it, we tried to do something with the PT boats and the South Vietnamese we had on our hands. McGeorge Bundy and General Harkins, who were directing the plan, decided to keep the boats busy by sending them on torpedo raids against North Vietnamese shore installations. The *USS Maddox* was accompanying one of these missions—attempting to draw fire from the

North Vietnamese batteries, so that the PT boats could then locate and attack them—when the North Vietnamese sent their own PT boats out to intercept it. This was the first step in the Tonkin Gulf "attack," which led to the Tonkin Resolution. In the official version of the story, of course, no one mentioned 34A or the South Vietnamese boats. From the 34A adventure the government found out essentially the same thing it had learned at the Bay of Pigs—that "our" guerrillas couldn't even get off the beaches because the villagers were not exactly running out of their houses to meet them with baskets of food and offers of help. Of course, the Bay of Pigs planners had been slightly more cynical about the Freedom Fighters' chances of success; in preparing the brigade for the big invasion, the American instructors did not even bother with the pretense of teaching them what to do once they made it into the hills. The idea was to get them on the beach and then let the U. S. Air Force clear the path from there.

2. *The Can-Do Guys*

The Vietnam era is full of inconsistencies, and one of them is this: the Pentagon Papers indicate that the President had been getting the bad news from the word go, while those who worked in the White House at the time say that no one ever told the President the worst. There is an explanation for this difference, and it lies in the two worlds of government.

The CIA has always been, in effect, two agencies, which reflect these two styles of government. On the one hand, there is the "clandestine," James Bond wing, inheritor of the OSS and the spy tradition, which has left its mark from the Bay of Pigs to the poppy fields of Laos. Then there is an intelligence or analysis branch, which serves much the same function as similar bureaucracies at the State Department or elsewhere. It was the people in this branch, the career civil

servants, who produced during the 1950s and '60s the reports about Vietnam which, when collected in the Pentagon papers, now seem so prescient.

The good side of this bureaucratic culture is that it places a premium on covering one's ass, which in turn involves considerable flirtation with telling the truth. The main risk a bureaucratic adviser faces is that, after an adventure has gone sour, someone might look back at his report and see that he had left out a crucial fact. So, any piece of information which, in retrospect, he *should* have known about, the bureaucrat crams into his report. Thus, if you look through the Pentagon Papers, you will see, on page 138, that Diem was shaky, and on page 924 that it would take a half million men or more to prop the country up, and on page 2076 that we couldn't win anyhow.

But because the dominant emotion was so clearly survival rather than any white-heat frenzy about telling the truth, once the bureaucrats had covered themselves within the chain of command they were very, very slow about going outside with their views. Now that the Pentagon Papers have revealed the existence of so many truth-telling heroes in the CIA, you may wonder why we never heard from any of them when the war was actually going on. Chester Cooper, a former CIA analyst, describes in his book, *The Lost Crusade*, what happened. Cooper's own reports were full of gloom, but when he went to the National Security Council meetings as a spear-carrier for the official agency spokesman, it was different: "The President, in due course, would announce his decision and then poll everyone in the room—Council members, their assistants, and members of the White House and NSC staffs. 'Mr. Secretary, do you agree with the decision?' 'Yes, Mr. President.' 'Mr. X, do you agree?' 'I agree, Mr. President.' During the process I would frequently fall into a Mitty-like fantasy: when they turn

I would rise to my feet slowly, around the room, and then directly at the President, and say very quietly and emphatically, 'Mr. President, gentlemen, I most definitely do not agree.' But I was removed from my trance when I heard the President's voice saying, 'Mr. Cooper, do you agree?' and out would come a 'Yes, Mr. President, I agree.'"

In their new book, *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence*, John Marks and Victor Marchetti give another illustration. After the Cambodian invasion in 1970, several hundred employees from the intelligence division, not from the clandestine branch, signed a petition of protest:

"Director Richard Helms was so concerned about the prospect of widespread unrest in the agency's ranks and the chance that word might leak out to the public that he summoned all the protestors to the main auditorium and lectured them on the need to separate their personal views from their professional duties. At the same time, similar demonstrations on the Cambodian issue were mounted at the State Department and other government agencies. Nearly every newspaper in the country carried articles about the incipient rebellion brewing in the ranks of the federal bureaucracy. The happenings at CIA, which were potentially the most newsworthy of all, were, however, never discovered by the press. . . . CIA employees had conducted a secret protest."

'Keep in Mind, Mr. President. . .'

To their credit, the bureaucrats did speak up, unlike their brothers, the secret agents. Principled outrage had never been the clandestine branch's strong point; when they were busy assassinating Vietnamese double agents or unloading the latest shipment of opium from an Air America charter, the operators rarely knocked off for a few minutes to draft a petition to Helms. The operators

lacked that moral tripwire that made the bureaucrats protest. But, having protested within channels, the bureaucrats weren't about to break the rules or risk their jobs by going outside.

A Washington editor for a New York publishing house, Lois O'Neill, says she has a hard time explaining the bureaucratic side of government culture here to people in New York, because New York is an operator-type place. A city based on high risks and fast rises, as New York is, has difficulty grasping the cover-your-ass survival ethic that explains so much about the world of the civil servant.

The same sort of cultural gulf exists within Washington, because the White House staff, too, is a high-risk, can-do outfit. The men around the President are there because they can get things done, and they know that mere caution will not get them far. Their influence today and their hope of more influence tomorrow depend on exhibiting those bright flashes that will catch the President's eye, and not on covering themselves like the bureaucrats. You can sympathize with the President's need for such can-do men when you imagine him in the Oval Office, awash with CIA and State Department reports so balanced and so carefully hedged that it's impossible to figure out what to *do*. When the President wants that kind of touching-all-the-bases advice, he can phone up the Bureau of National Estimates at the CIA. But when he reaches for his right-hand man, it's because the doubts are over and it's time to go to work.

Since the Watergate tapes deal mainly with the inner circle, it is no surprise that so much of their advice is of the how-to-do-it variety. Amid tough competition, Ron Ziegler must certainly win the award as the can-do Pangloss of all the Nixon courtiers. During the early conversations when Haldeman, Ehrlichman, and Dean are saying yes, boss, we can pull through, Nixon, too, seems to share their

and part, some guilt that Stevenson had been the one to recommend what they knew was the "right" gesture for peace.

The Stevenson of the Nixon era is Richard Kleindienst. Despite his ITT perjury, Kleindienst was relatively clean on the Watergate affair. He survived his first deviation from the can-do philosophy—turning down Gordon Liddy's golf course request to spring the burglars—but he did not survive his second. Soon after he told the President that someone had to inform Judge Matt Byrne about the Ellsberg break-in, Kleindienst was dropped in a pointedly vindictive way. In April, 1973, Nixon announced the resignations, under a cloud, of four top officials. They were Haldeman, Ehrlichman, and Dean, the three main conspirators, plus Kleindienst, who was the only one of the four to resign on principle rather than be forced out, but who was lumped in the public mind with the black sheep.

The Leaker Is the Enemy

In one passage on the tapes, Nixon gives quite remarkable expression to this contempt for the White House weaklings. After John Dean promises him he will never, never leak about the goings-on, Nixon says, "I was reading a book last night. A fascinating book, although fun book, by Malcolm Smith, Jr., on Kennedy's Thirteen Mistakes, the great mistakes. And one of them was the Bay of Pigs. And what had happened, there was Chester Bowles had learned about it, and he deliberately leaked it. Deliberately, because he wanted the operation to fail! And he admitted it! Admitted it!"

In this one statement Nixon reveals what's really behind the continued presidential failures. If you believe that Chester Bowles caused the Bay of Pigs, that the leakers are the villains, then you haven't come very close to understanding what really went wrong.

While presidents may be under-

stood, if not excused, for their belief that the leaker is the enemy, a lot of us outside the White House have the same idea in our heads. When the Judiciary Committee leaked its "stonewall" quote—"I want you to stonewall it, take the Fifth Amendment, cover up..."—the general reaction was to pay more attention to the problem of leaks than to what the President actually said. The story received no prominence on the networks, was run on page nine of *The Washington Post* and page 24 of *The Washington Star-News*, and got similar treatment from all the other papers except the one that broke it, *The Los Angeles Times*. Mike Mansfield gave a solemn speech about the horrors of leaking, and since Mike Mansfield never says anything bad about anybody, this was harsh criticism indeed. During this same period, hard as it is to recall, the momentum seemed to be running in Nixon's favor and against impeachment. Some journalists, like Joseph Kraft, appeared not even to have seen the story; a few weeks later, when the evidence was officially out, Kraft wrote a column blaming the committee members for not highlighting the quote. By that time, a curious double-echo effect kept the story from becoming big news. Because of the previous leak, it was already "old news." Only *Newsweek*, which ran the quotation on its cover, gave the story the prominence it deserved. Until the President's own revelations, it was the single most damaging piece of evidence against him.

What this fear of the leak finally boils down to is not just a fear of malicious comment but a fear of the truth. You can't stand to have Liddy or the Freedom Fighters talk about what you've been doing, so you go deeper into disaster trying to shut them up. How much better it would have been to have paid the price for cutting the losses early, by admitting we couldn't prop up Diem, letting the Freedom Fighters say that Kennedy had abandoned them, or even buying J. Edgar Hoover a bullet-proof vest. ■