



Don Oakley

The Nixon Taxes: Case Not Closed

By Don Oakley

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It is not yet clear whether Rep. Wilbur Mills was guilty of overstatement when he predicted that President Nixon's tax troubles would be more damaging to him than Watergate.

In fact, the President's quick reaffirmation of his pledge to pay whatever back taxes the IRS decided he owed — some \$476,000 including interest for the first four years of his presidency — and the absence of any finding of fraud on his part by the Joint Committee on Internal Revenue Taxation may be considered by many people to have concluded the episode. It may even have won some sympathy for the President.

But if one year of Watergate has not "been enough," the few days that have elapsed since the congressional committee made its report have hardly been enough time for the full import of the matter to sink into the public consciousness, especially as each day seems to bring some new revelation about the President's finances.

Again, Mr. Nixon has attempted to place himself on a lofty pinnacle above it all.

"Any errors which may have been made in the preparation of the President's returns," said a White House statement, "were made by those to whom he delegated the responsibility for preparing his returns and were made without his knowledge and without his approval."

This simply will not do.

We are to believe that Mr. Nixon raised no eyebrows when he was asked to sign a return on which hundreds of thousands of dollars had been deducted for the donation of his vice-presidential papers to the National Archives (a large portion of which is now revealed to have consisted of invitations and newspaper clippings), offsetting almost his total income in 1969 — and this in a year when Congress was in the process of abolishing this provision in the tax laws?

We are to believe that the President did not go over his returns line by line and item by item, as certain of his advisors have said that he did?

We are to believe that he just happened to call all the close ones — the little ones as well as the big ones — in his own favor?

The huge tax bill the President must pay will "wipe him out," says the White House. The ordinary working stiff is supposed to feel sorry for the President when it has been shown that the money should never have been his in the first place?

The reasonable person may retain reasonable doubts about the President's involvement in Watergate. What can be said in defense of the shabby example he has set in meeting his tax obligations?

It is far more than a question of dollars and cents, of the validity or nonvalidity of this or that deduction, things about which honest men may honestly disagree.

It is the moral performance of the nation's first citizen, and not any technical finding of fraud that could be included in a bill of impeachment, that Wilbur Mills had in mind.