Tracing Presidential Power: All in the Name of Security

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

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Poster

The current issue of First Monday, the offical organ of the Republican National Committee, has an interesting article about scandals in the moribund Office of Economic Opportunity. There's no mention of Watergate but then a Republican can't open his mouth or put pen to paper these days without an inadvertant plunge into irony.

In the light of what's been going on, the magazine's readers may have shaken their heads upon seeing this quote culled from the writings of the liberal Walter Lippmann: "Only the President, because he is the Chief Executive, is in a position to know all the facts. Only the President and his advisers are in a position to weight all the facts. Therefore, the President alone can lead the country."

This citation is published as a gibe at those liberals who are now crying to the skies that the presidency has acquired so much power it threatens national security. The point they're making is that liberals bitch about a strong presidency when they're out of power and vaunt the idea when their man is in.

They nail the idea home with a telling 1961 quote from Sen. J. William Fulbright, a man who has now come to hold an almost diametrically opposite opinion to the one he had in the early days of the Kennedy administration.

"The President is hobbled in his task of leading the American people to consensus and concerted action by the restrictions of power imposed upon him by a constitutional system designed for 18-century agrarian society far removed from the centers of world power. It is imperative that we break out of the intellectual confines of cherished and traditional beliefs."

These quotes put Nixon's claim that the government was in the burglary business up until 1966 in something more than a self-serving light. He's telling us that we have switched the rules on him, that we approved of almost any act, legal or not, in the name of national security until quite recently. He can point to Fulbright's practically saying that the Constitution is an obsolete impediment to the President's doing his job.

Richard Nixon's got more than that going for him. Who uttered these comforting words? "I don't believe that the government, as a political group of men, has a right to lie, but when a nation's life is at stake, that takes precedence over everything . . ." It wasn't Ron Ziegler, the White House Pinocchio, but Arthur Sylvester, assistance secretary of defense for public affairs under John F. Kennedy.

Without exculpating Richard Nixon or his friends, backers and collaborators—indicted, unindicted or

See COMMENTARY, B3, Col. 2

COMMENTARY, FROM B1

fugitives from justice—it remains that Watergate was prepared by the Kennedy administration. True, the building of the over-powerful presidency goes much farther back than 1960, but the White House of pro-consular presidential assistants, imbued with the notion of obedience to the boss, not the law, saw its first full bloom in the Kennedy years.

Camelot was populated by a bunch of cocksure power mechanics who were as proud of being called "tough-nosed" as the Nixon gang is. Their motto was just as much "Get the job done and don't tell me how" as Richard Nixon's Huns' motto is now.

Is the Watergate bugging any more of an affront to civil liberties than the Martin Luther King bugging? That was done under John Kennedy, and ordered by his brother, an Attorney General who was as savage in his own way as John Mitchell was in his. Can the Kennedy use of the FBI to intimidate the U.S. Steel Corp. into a price rollback be defended by anyone with a respect for our basic laws?

Such acts then and now are defended in the same way. National security, domestic security, the national interest—we've heard the language before. Think of the justification for the large scale surveillance of civilians by the military under Lyndon Johnson, and fairness compels you to say that Richard Nixon has been expanding on a received definition of the presidency, and not creating a new one.

Two of the outstanding men in the Nixon administration come from Kennedy's, where they played far smaller parts. John Connally was John Kennedy's Secretary of the Navy, while Henry Kissinger spent two years in a kind of half-life as a Kennedy foreign policy consultant in a dungeon in the Executive Office Building.

In a fashion, Kissinger may embody the similarities and the differences. The man made his first reputation in the 1950's as a persistent proponent of the use of tactical nuclear weapons. The hard nose again. "Too German, too ponderous and heavyhanded to be part of Camelot," as David Landau puts it in his excellent Kissinger study, this doughy, refugee Bavarian dumpling, was squeezed out of the White House by special presidential assistant McGeorge Bundy, the man who'd originally brought him in from Harvard, because he suspected that Dr. K was trying to end-run him around into JFK's office. Now Henry is as particular as to who gets in to see the boss.

The Kraut professor whose pants were too baggy and face too grave for the Kennedys is the style star and personality kid of the Nixon era. But these aren't matters of substance; they only confirm the suspicion that Pat Nixon puts plastic covers over the chairs in the Green Room. They also confirm that there has been a shared basic definition of the American presidency since 1960 at least, and that it prepared the way for Watergate as much as any dishonesty now being ascribed to its present occupant.