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Mr. Nixon And His Friends

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By James Reston

WASHINGTON, March 29—President Nixon is in personal trouble over the Watergate case, not because there is any evidence that he knew about the conspiracy, but because he has not handled it in accordance with the candor and fair moral principles he insists he represents.

When he talks, Mr. Nixon is a moralizer, the faithful son of Quaker parents and Quaker ideals, whose duty it is to summon the people back to their ethical and religious ideals. But when he acts, he is a tough, cunning and even ruthless operator, and he is in trouble over the Watergate precisely because his actions do not correspond to his proclaimed ideals.

He says he is for an "open Administration," open minds and open doors, but he will not allow his White House staff to be questioned by the Congress on their relations—not with the President, which is fair enough—but with the men convicted of bugging and burglarizing the Democrats at the Watergate.

This is no longer an argument between the White House and the reporters who exposed the links between the Watergate and the President's re-election committee, or even between the Republicans and the Democrats. Mr. Nixon is in trouble now with the conservative spies, who were hired to break into the Watergate and are now talking about who hired them, and he is also in trouble with conservative Republican Senators, like James Buckley of New York, and even the Republican leader in the Senate, Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania, who are insisting that all the facts in this conspiracy should finally be published.

Accordingly, Mr. Nixon is in effect being asked by conservative members

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of his own party not to hide behind "executive privilege" or other legal arguments but to get the facts out in the open and face the consequences as he did in his last major political and moral crisis of the Checkers speech in the Presidential campaign of 1952.

At that time, Mr. Nixon was charged with having a secret political campaign fund of \$18,000, which seems almost innocent these days, but Mr.

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Nixon felt obliged then to go on television and explain the facts, and the difference between things that are "illegal" and things that are "wrong."

"The usual thing to do when charges are made against you," he said then, "is to either ignore them or to deny them without giving details. I believe we've had enough of that in the United States."

"I feel that the people have got to have confidence in the integrity of the men who run for . . . office. It isn't a question of whether it [the \$18,000 Nixon fund] was legal or illegal. That isn't enough. The question is, was it morally wrong?"

It may seem odd now to look back on the Nixon Checkers speech as a symbol of political principle, but the question of what is legal and what is wrong is precisely the question before Mr. Nixon on the Watergate. Nixon the moralist is now acting as Nixon the lawyer.

He is now doing the "usual thing," which he condemned in 1952. He is either "ignoring" the charges in the Watergate or "denying them without giving details." He is not explaining anything personally, and also not allowing his staff to explain, and this raises another question.

For in the last four years, while Mr. Nixon has been arguing publicly for the decentralization of power, he has been centralizing power in a White

House staff that has been loyal to the President but increasingly powerful and even arrogant toward the Cabinet and the Congress.

The result of all this is that the Congress, even the Republican members of the Congress, are no longer willing to ignore the Watergate scandal but feel obliged to expose the facts, even if the facts hurt the President and expose the tricks of his political associates.

Every once in a while, the dirty business of party politics goes against the national interest, and even party members revolt. And this is what is happening now. During the last Presidential election campaign, Republicans chasing for office didn't want to hear about the Watergate, and denounced the press for writing about it; but now that the campaign is over and the facts are coming out in court, even the politicians are insisting on getting at the facts.

But not yet the President. He is still trying to "ignore" the facts or "deny them without giving details"—the technique he denounced over twenty years ago—but the technique is not working.

The courts and the Congress are now talking to the burglars, who are spilling the beans. And at some point the President is going to have to speak out on the facts or be unfaithful to the principles of what he calls "the open Nixon Administration."