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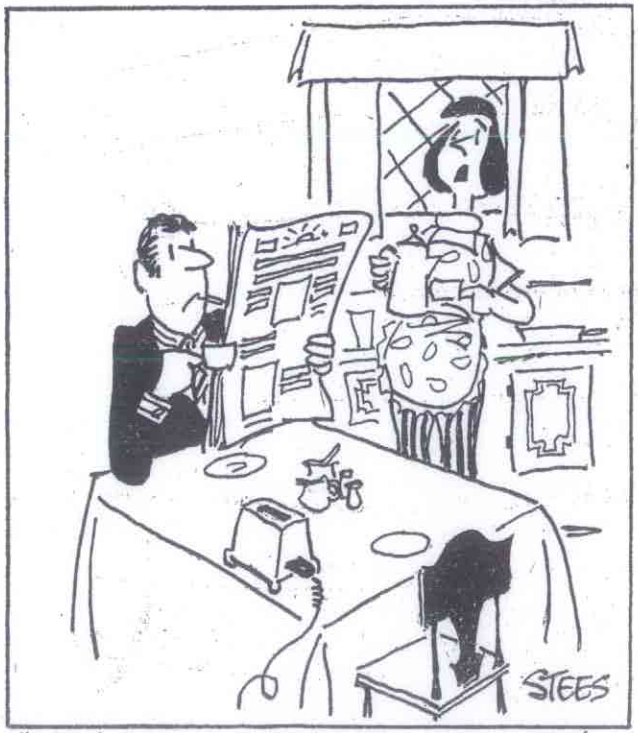
Loyalty-Freak Nixon Cursed Himself with Scandal-Prone Staff

A pernicious myth that once served to make Watergate seem a mere caper now threatens to blow it up into a supreme national disaster. It is the myth that Watergate is somehow representative of what goes on in American politics.

In fact, the scandal is as unique as a signature. It does not indict the whole political system. In the wake of the latest resignations, the President should have no great difficulty rebuilding the administration once he faces up to his personal responsibility.



"WHO'S BEING INVESTIGATED, AND WHAT'S HAZARDOUS TO OUR HEALTH TODAY?"

What sets Watergate apart is the absence of the usual motives for political vice. Cash was lying around in profuse abundance, but no one put a duke in the tambourine. Sex did not rear its ugly head. The crime of Watergate was passionless, almost selfless.

The motivating element sprang from the extraordinary relation of President Nixon to the chief White House political aides. Most Presidents draw their assistants from a wide reach of past experience and association.

In the Eisenhower administration, for example, Sherman Adams, who served as White House chief of staff, had previously been elected governor of New Hampshire in his own right. Larry O'Brien, a chief strategist and Congressional liaison man in the Kennedy administration formerly served a Massachusetts rival, Foster Furcolo. Even in the last embattled days of the Johnson administration, the White House chief of staff, Marvin Watson, came from the office of John Connally, then governor of Texas, while the chief domestic policy man, Joseph Califano, came from the Robert McNamara Pentagon.

But Mr. Nixon has been a loner in politics. Like many people who travel by themselves, he tends to see ghosts. So he has surrounded himself with political aides whose salient characteristic is fidelity to the boss. In building his staff, Mr. Nixon has been a loyalty freak.

H. R. (Bob) Haldeman rose to be White House chief of staff by political service for one man only—Richard Nixon. John Ehrlichman followed that route to the post of chief advisor on domestic politics. John Mitchell ascended to the office of Attorney General along the same path.

Mr. Haldeman, from the beginning, seeded the White House staff with men of equally fervent devotion and narrow focus. He moved a personal protege, Ronald Ziegler, in as press secretary despite the far more impressive experience of Herbert Klein. He tried, when it looked as though there would be no Vietnam cease-fire agreement last fall, to "get" Henry Kissinger.

The atmosphere of superloyalty inevitably affected those few outsiders who managed to penetrate the inner circle. Charles Colson, for example, had served on the staff of Senator Leverett Saltonstall of Massachusetts. But I well remember once when we lunched, that he was chewed out by a Haldeman minion for, in effect, consorting with the enemy. And in the 1972 campaign he felt obliged to advertise his loyalty in the famous memo about being prepared to "walk over" his grandmother "if necessary."

Given that atmosphere, there was nothing the President's men would not do to promote Mr. Nixon's interests. Their loyalties to the man blinded them to the interest of the presidency and the nation. There lies the logic of the bugging, the sabotage campaign, and the coverup.