

Nixon - Record before me.



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# The Watergate Caper

SOLID, practical reasons argue that Republican leaders were not directly connected with anything as inept as the recent attempt to enter Democratic headquarters at the Watergate complex. But you don't hear anybody saying that President Nixon and John Mitchell couldn't have been involved because they are too honorable and high-minded, too sensitive to the requirements of decency, fair play and law.

You don't hear that any more than you hear that Falstaff was thin, and the absence of even an attempt to make the moral case points up the true connection between the Republican chiefs and the Watergate affair. The central fact is that the President and his campaign manager have set a tone that positively encourages dirty work by low-level operators.

The President's record goes back a long way. Every election he has fought since 1946 has featured smear charges, knees in the groin and thumbs in the eye. That includes the 1970 election when he campaigned as President.

Preparations for the 1972 election indicate some change in the old pattern. Mr. Nixon seems to be trying to stand above the battle. Hence the rarity of press conferences and other personal appearances.

But there are still signs of the Old Adam. On Vietnam the White House often implies—and occasionally says flatly—that those who disagree with the President are helping the enemy. So it is a question whether Mr. Nixon can stick to the aloof stance. The more so since he has Mr. Mitchell as campaign manager.

THE REMARKABLE thing

about Mr. Mitchell is how so intelligent a man could have compiled, in such a brief career as a public figure, so many deep associations in matters involving chicanery and the cutting of corners. The most delicate cases he brought as Attorney General—the charges against Angela Davis, the Berrigan Brothers, the Chicago 7 for conspiracy, and Mayor Joseph Alioto of San Francisco—turn out to

have had an astonishing insufficiency of evidence.

His claim of authority to bug domestic subversives without advance judicial approval was unanimously rejected by a Supreme Court dominated by Nixon appointees. The man he chose to head the sensitive criminal division at the Justice Department had to retire after figuring in a gamy Texas scandal involving fraud and bribery.

Even as Mr. Mitchell became campaign manager for 1972, the Republicans refused, in plain contradiction with the spirit of the new law on campaign spending, to divulge the names of big contributors who gave before the statute became applicable. The very name of Mr. Mitchell's outfit—the Committee for Reelection of the President—smacks of deception. It implies that the candidate is not familiar shopworn you-know-who from Whittier, Calif., but some noble, heroic spirit with a permanent claim on the White House.

INEVITABLY such deeds and misdeeds generate a climate, an atmosphere. The atmosphere in Washington these days is as unmistakable as it was during the last days of Harry Truman.

Then a blind eye was

turned to taking gifts and doings favors. Now the special tolerance is of using unethical means for partisan purposes. Bending the law for political advantage is involved.

Probably the gang that tried to break into Democratic headquarters had reasons of its own. The attempts to link them with Mr. Nixon through Charles Colson of the White House staff show association but not guilt. It is hard to believe that there was anything at Democratic National Committee headquarters the Republican wanted badly enough to run the risk of being caught in the act of breaking and entering.

But members of the gang have important Republicans as clients. Some of them arranged fair trials for themselves. Some capered.

Mr. Mitchell, they could come to only one conclusion. Namely, that doing the dirty on the Democrats would earn them good marks and high favor.

So there is a connection, albeit indirect, and also a lesson. Unless the President and Mr. Mitchell clean up their own operations, they are going to be made to pay a price. They will find that they cannot get away with keeping the President above the battle. They will see themselves trapped in the miasma of disbelief and suspicion which, after almost four years of the Nixon administration, is thicker than ever.

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