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A Few 'Overzealous' Men?

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One of the recurring themes played by Americans who don't want to face the truth about their President is: "I don't believe he's involved, but I admit he made some mistakes in choosing the people to work for him."

Naturally enough, Mr. Nixon has encouraged the theme. Last August, for instance, while he was accepting "full responsibility" for Watergate, he managed to make clear that the blame belonged to his "overzealous" subordinates.

The President, that is to say, is the innocent victim of bad luck in the personnel office.

Maybe you have to start with a premise like that if you insist on arriving at a conclusion of presidential non-

involvement. But if you're willing to look at what is there, it seems easier to believe that Mr. Nixon had good luck, not bad, in choosing his subordinates — good luck in the sense that he got what he was looking for.

By no means were all the overzealous underlings who got the President in such deep trouble unknown to him before he brought them to Washington. When Richard Nixon's 1962 California gubernatorial campaign committee was charged with organizing and financing an effort to sabotage his opponent's campaign, the San Francisco County Superior Court found that the effort was directly authorized and approved by Mr. Nixon and one H. R. Haldeman.

This is not to say that Haldeman's implication in that relatively minor scandal proves he was guilty of conceiving, participating in or covering up the Watergate scandals. It is only to say that Richard Nixon knew who he was hiring as his White House chief of staff.

Look over the list of the President's "overzealous" top aides, and it strains the imagination to suppose that the pattern is accidental: John Ehrlichman, Dwight Chapin, Charles Colson, John Dean, Herbert Kalmbach, John Mitchell. As a matter of fact, it's easier to assume that the accidents were the handful of decent nonzealots who weren't kept around for long—men such as Donald Rumsfeld and Robert Finch and precious few others.

The President's "overzealous" subordinates turn out to be indistinguishable

from the unwavering loyalists and yes-men that Mr. Nixon seems so attracted to. The qualities that brought the men to the White House are the qualities that made Watergate possible.

If it is reasonable to believe that the President carefully selected his top aides—and that it is no accident that so many of them are so much alike in style and mindset—it is decidedly not reasonable to suppose that they felt free to act as independent agents. You have to assume at the very least that the subordinates were free to act only within clearly understood guidelines—including a good understanding of what is tolerable and what is not.

Of course, there may have been misunderstandings. No administration is without underlings who go off half-cocked and embarrass their chief by doing something that he would never countenance. But to attribute the host of Nixon administration scandals to mistakes of that sort is to condemn the President for hiring—and retaining—a boatload of incompetents.

No, the suspicion is that the embarrassment to Mr. Nixon is not in the fact that his representatives have done

some scandalous things in his name, but that their scandalous acts were found out.

He could have made it easier to believe otherwise if, when the scandals were first exposed, he had swept the perpetrators out of the White House and apologized to the nation for abuses committed in his name. Instead, his response was: Scandal? What scandal? And all the while he has made every effort to keep us from finding out the breadth and depth of the crimes and improprieties called Watergate.

These continuing efforts at concealment suggest one of two things: that he doesn't want to know what the facts are or that he knows already.

And don't look for help from the presidential tapes. The crucial June 20, 1972 conversation with John Mitchell shortly after the Watergate break-in took place on a phone not hooked into the automatic taping system. The record of the President's conversation that same day with Chief-of-Staff Haldeman was obliterated in the 18-minute erasure. And now it turns out that the President's own taped recollection of the Mitchell call conversation contains a 37-second blank at a critical juncture.

There could, of course, be innocent explanations for all these gaps. "Overzealous" subordinates, for instance. Or tapeworms.