

Where They Stand: Talking With Murray Chotiner

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Watergate Operation 'Stupid and Immoral'

Just a block from the White House are the law offices of Murray Chotiner, Richard Nixon's first political teacher. It was Chotiner who ran the 1946 and 1950 Nixon Congressional campaigns. More recently, Chotiner spent 14 months on Mr. Nixon's White House staff.

QUESTION: You said there were aspects of the Watergate affair you would not discuss. What are they?

Murray Chotiner: With the various investigations going on, I think it would be most improper for me as a lawyer to make any comment concerning Watergate. Other than to say that anyone who had anything to do with it participated in a very stupid, insane operation. It was wrong legally — and wrong morally — to engage in a bugging operation of anyone, anywhere, unless it was done for national security.

QUESTION: But isn't there a similarity between the tactics employed by you and Richard Nixon in the 1946 and 1950 campaigns and the kind of operation carried out at Watergate?

ANSWER: There is absolutely no comparison in any way between what happened at Watergate and the 1946 and 1950 campaigns. There was never anything done in those early campaigns that was illegal in any manner whatsoever, nor anything that was immoral.

QUESTION: If that is the case, do you regret that those campaigns have given



Murray Chotiner
"Don't sell Nixon short."

you the reputation as one of the greatest political Machiavellis of our time?

ANSWER: I don't apologize for either the 1946 or 1950 campaigns. They were conducted on truth and on fact. Just because some people couldn't stand having the truth told is their problem, not mine. I can't be responsible for what people may have said about the campaigns.

QUESTION: Since the Checkers speech in 1952, Richard Nixon's usual approach to a crisis has been to attempt a great

speech. Have you been satisfied with his efforts in response to Watergate?

ANSWER: I don't think the subject calls for oratory in any manner whatsoever. If it calls for anything, it calls for a statement of views and facts. My own personal opinion is that you should never answer the charges of anyone until the charges have been fully made.

QUESTION: Based on what has been revealed so far, do you think there will be a need for President Nixon to respond to the charges?

ANSWER: I don't think the President should respond until after the opposition has made its full case.

QUESTION: Do you consider the Ervin committee "the opposition"?

ANSWER: I consider the opposition to be statements that attempt to link the President with the things that happened at the Watergate.

QUESTION: Shouldn't Richard Nixon respond to the precipitous drop in the public's confidence in his Presidency?

ANSWER: My suggestion is that no one should sell Richard Nixon short. If they do, they are going to find out that they are mistaken. He has a rare ability to bounce back after adversity.

QUESTION: Don't we have a situation where either the President knew about the Watergate cover-up, and is therefore implicated, or did not know what his subordinates were doing, in which case he was incompetent?

ANSWER: The only testimony we have so far that indicates the President might have known is the testimony of John Dean. If he did not know, it was because he was concerned with our relationship to Russia and China and the state of the American economy. To have been otherwise would have been to neglect the duties of the Presidency.

QUESTION: But isn't the Watergate also important?

ANSWER: I'm not minimizing it, but things have relative importance. Unless there was something brought to his attention, there was no reason for him to know that a cover-up was taking place. Does anyone believe that someone on the White House staff would go in one morning and say, "Mr. President, look what I did last night. I bugged the Watergate"? Obviously no one would do that, so therefore Nixon didn't show incompetence. He's not a detective.

QUESTION: If certain people on the White House staff took part in illegal activities, is there something wrong with the President's recruitment process?

ANSWER: There wasn't the slightest intimation that anyone had ever participated in an illegal act — or an immoral act — at the time they were admitted to the White House staff. Now you are asking me to pass judgment on whether, once there, they committed an illegal act, and this I won't do.

(Interview conducted by Walter Shapiro, of The Washington Monthly.)