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Watergate

The Story So Far

By J. Anthony Lukas

This issue of The Magazine is devoted to a single article—the story of the Watergate affair so far. With revelations and charges still pouring forth, with many witnesses, indictments and trials yet to come, it cannot be a definitive history nor can it offer conclusive judgments. But from the tangled strands of the affair there does emerge a discrete narrative, offering a fresh perspective on the scope and implications of the story to date. The sources for statements in the article include transcripts of Congressional hearings, depositions, newspaper accounts and interviews by the author.

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Chief Newman, my coach, an American Indian, produced some very fine teams at that small, little college at Whittier . . . There were no excuses for failure. He didn't feel sorry for you when you got knocked down. He had a different definition of being a good loser. He said: "You know what a good loser is? It's somebody who hates to lose. . . ."

—Richard M. Nixon,
at Pro Football Hall of Fame dinner,
July 30, 1971.

IN the raw winter of 1970, Richard Nixon looked like a loser. From balmy San Clemente and Key Biscayne, White House aides strove earnestly to put the best possible face on the returns in that November's midterm elections. But back in Washington a consensus was hardening, like ice on the Mall's reflecting pool, that the election constituted a serious setback for the President and an ominous portent for 1972.

The G.O.P. did gain two seats in the Senate and lost only 12 in the House—less than the party in power generally does at midterm. But it also lost 11 governorships and some key state legislatures. Except for Tennessee, the ballyhooed Southern strategy failed to gain the Republicans any ground below the Mason-Dixon line. And they did badly in many of the largest states—notably California, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Texas and Florida—where the 1972 election would almost certainly be decided. When 28 Republican Governors and Governors-elect gathered that December among the snowy peaks of Sun Valley, Idaho, their standing joke was that they should have met at Death Valley. Gov. Edgar D. Whitcomb of Indiana, which gave Mr. Nixon his biggest majority in 1968, said the President was in trouble even there. Columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak wrote later: "In November, 1970, the Presi-



dency of Richard Nixon had hit bottom."

The gloomy post-mortems that winter often focused on the President's strident "law and order" campaigning, particularly his harsh Phoenix speech ("No band of violent thugs is going to keep me from going out and speaking with the American people") rebroadcast on election eve—only to be followed immediately by Senator Edmund Muskie, measured and calm in a Maine living room, asking the voters to repudiate the Republicans' "politics of fear." Now, many Republicans felt the voters had done just that. Gov. David Cargo of New Mexico warned that his party had "lost the election because the strategy was completely negative."

Publicly, the Southern White House stuck with its upbeat appraisal, but behind the palm fronds it began reassessing its strategy. A few days after the election, the President met with his senior aides at Key Biscayne to—in one aide's words—"go over the game films." Later

that month, a smaller group, headed by Attorney General John Mitchell, closeted with him again. From this session emerged a unanimous conclusion: Nixon must drop his partisan image and henceforth be The President. Four days into the new year, Mr. Nixon publicly proclaimed his new persona in a televised interview with four network correspondents. "This is a non-campaign year," he told his interlocutors, "and now I am going to wear my hat as President of the United States."

But if the President was to assume an air of statesmanlike high-mindedness for the next two years, then others would have to carry on the tough partisan brawl build- (Continued on Page 8)

The story so far (cont.)

ing for '72. The two-tiered game plan called for a posture of unusual conciliation by the President and a stance of extra combativeness by his political operatives.

In January, the President handed the chairmanship of the Republican National Committee to Senator Robert Dole of Kansas, known for his hard-nosed partisanship. But nobody expected the real reins of the campaign to be held at the National Committee. "We knew we had a damn tough fight," one former Presidential aide recalls, "and we weren't going to entrust it to the bunch of cautious old hacks down at the committee." It was entrusted instead to the Committee for the Re-election of the President (CREEP), which in March, 1971, opened its offices in a glass and steel tower at 1701 Pennsylvania Avenue.

The CREEP offices—replete with deep orange pile carpeting, color-coordinated décor and new electric typewriters—were nothing if not convenient, barely 150 yards from the White House gates. It was an easy stroll for the brisk young men in double-knit suits who began shuttling back and forth across Lafayette Park that spring. A floor up

were the law offices of Murray Chotiner, one of the President's key political operatives, and right down the fourth-floor hallway from CREEP were the Washington offices of Mudge Rose Guthrie & Alexander, the Wall Street law firm which was alma mater to Richard Nixon and John Mitchell.

Mitchell, who headed one faction jockeying for supremacy in the President's inner circle, initially placed one of his protégés, Harry S. Flemming, in charge of CREEP. But, in May, 1971, H. R. (Bob) Haldeman, the President's chief of staff, who headed the rival faction, countered by sending over one of his own lieutenants, Jeb Stuart Magruder. Soon he was running the committee.



Named by his father, a Civil War buff, after the dashing Confederate cavalry general, Magruder hardly cut a dashing figure as a merchandiser of cosmetics, facial tissues and women's hosiery. The Magruder family had lived in Maryland since the 17th century, but young Jeb grew up in Staten Island. From an early age, he was fascinated by

merchandising—selling cosmetics to work his way through Williams College and promoting Vicks cough medicines during the summer. With a business degree from the University of Chicago, he started with the Jewel Tea Company and eventually became president of two small companies in California. Meanwhile, he faithfully put in his time as a Republican worker, "coordinated Southern California" for Nixon in 1968 and moved with him to Washington the next year—first as deputy director of communications, then as a special assistant. A self-styled "Nixonian Republican" who found himself "in complete agreement with the President," Magruder developed a reputation for loyalty. "He'll do what he's told to, maybe even to the point of sublimating his own judgment," says a former associate. And he had an open, easy-going manner (riding his 10-speed bicycle to work, even showing up on Saturdays in a sport shirt) which helped him earn others' loyalty. One colleague recalls: "I performed things for Jeb I wouldn't have done for anyone else."

There was a lot to do. As the spring wore on, it looked increasingly as though Nixon might indeed be a one-term President. In February, 1971, the Harris Poll showed Muskie leading Nixon 43 to 40. In March, it was 44 to 39. In May, 47 to 39.

State of Siege

All these things going on and we were powerless.

—Justice Department official on radical unrest of 1969-71.

MAY, 1971, was a time of torment in Washington. After weeks of more orderly antiwar protests, the Mayday Tribe descended on the city determined to "stop the Government" with an unprecedented wave of civil disobedience and disruption. For days, the motley legion of young demonstrators blocked streets and bridges with automobiles, trash cans, lumber and their own bodies. The Government responded with new "get tough" tactics, flying in the National Guard and Marines to augment police, arresting some 13,500 demonstrators and holding them for hours in large outdoor stockades. As tear gas swirled around some of the nation's most revered shrines and demonstrators blocked entrances to major Government buildings, the capital was in a virtual state of siege.

The events of that May fulfilled the worst fears of the men in the White House, fears that had been building for two years. As the Vietnam war dragged on and racial tensions persisted, the late sixties and early seventies were a period of nearly perpetual protest in America. Campus unrest, building through the decade, reached a peak in 1969-70 with nearly 1,800 demonstrations, many of them accompanied by bombings and other violence. The disorders reached a crescendo after the Cambodian invasion and the killing of six students at Kent State and Jackson State in May, 1970, with more than 440 colleges closed down or otherwise disrupted. Meanwhile, sporadic gun battles were continuing in communities across

the country between militant blacks and police.

The President did his best to project an air of lofty disdain for such activities, letting word leak out that he had been watching football on TV during one march. But it now appears that he and the men around him were far more concerned, even desperate, than they let on. John Dean, former counsel to the President, says advance men for Presidential trips were instructed to insure that demonstrators remained "unseen and unheard" by the President and for that purpose Haldeman authorized "any means—legal or illegal."

One day, the President looked out his window and saw a man (later identified as Monroe Cornish, a Maryland schoolteacher) with a 10-foot banner stretched out in front of Lafayette Park. Dean says one of Haldeman's assistants told him of the President's "displeasure" and Haldeman's decision that "the sign had to come down." Dean says he then ran into Dwight Chapin, the President's appointments secretary, who said he was going to get some "thugs" to remove the man. Instead, Dean called the Secret Service, who got the Park Police to convince the man that he should move across the park, where the sign would be out of the President's sight.

The President's suspicion of critics and demonstrators was reinforced among his advisers. One official recalls a feeling at the White House then that "we were faced with one of the most serious domestic crises we've had." There is little doubt that in the superheated atmosphere of 1969-70, the President and the men around him perceived the unrest as a genuine threat to "national security." But, apparently, they felt another kind of security was at stake, too—the President's political security.

During the October, 1969, antiwar moratorium,

David Broder wrote a column in The Washington Post which said: "It is becoming more obvious with every passing day that the men and the movement that broke Lyndon B. Johnson's authority in 1968 are out to break Richard M. Nixon in 1969. The likelihood is great that they will succeed again. . . ." According to a former White House aide, Broder's column was "read and discussed very thoroughly in the circles around the President and had quite an impact. We took the warning very seriously." A Justice Department memo reinforced this fear by contending that antiwar leaders had devised "a three-phase program designed to defeat President Nixon in the 1972 Presidential election."

By 1969-70, the White House was increasingly pervaded by what one former Presidential aide calls the "us vs. them" outlook. "It didn't matter who you were or what ideological positions you took," the aide recalls. "You were either for us or against us, and if you were against us we were against you. It was real confrontational politics and there were a number of men around the White House who clearly relished that sort of thing." One of those men was Charles (Chuck) Colson, the special counsel to the President.



"If you've got 'em by the —, their hearts and minds will follow," reads the Green Beret slogan over the bar in Chuck Colson's den. Colson is a "tough guy," who once served as the youngest company commander in the Marines and kept a Marine poster in his office. A friend calls him