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Power and Corruption

By Tom Wicker

No wonder the latest Gallup Poll shows a sharp decline in public esteem for the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Central Intelligence Agency—from 84 percent “highly favorable” to the F.B.I. in 1965, for example, to only 37 percent today. And only 14 percent of a sample of 1,515 adults were any longer “highly favorable” to the C.I.A.

These figures clearly reflect the long, dismal series of disclosures that both agencies have abused their powers, been misused by their political masters, threatened in various ways the constitutional rights of American citizens they were supposedly protecting, and participated in such reprehensible schemes as murder plots against foreign leaders and character assassination plots against Americans.

The latest of these unlovely disclosures is that the F.B.I. has been supplying secret dossiers, conducting illicit bugs and taps, and carrying on other forms of political surveillance for every President at least back to Franklin Roosevelt.

That merely confirms what most critics of the security agencies have believed all along—that they were not so much evading or thwarting political control as succumbing to it. So far from operating against the wishes of Presidents and their advisers—in all Administrations of both parties in the last forty years—they were mostly doing either what they were told, or what they correctly perceived that their superiors wanted them to do.

Several things need to be said about this—the first of which is that, as apologists for Richard Nixon have insisted, a certain double standard of accountability has been at work. Whatever Mr. Nixon's misdeeds, it is now undeniable that he was by no means the first President to order wiretaps, punitive tax investigations, political surveillances of his “enemies,” and the like. His critics should be careful, also, about too glibly suggesting that Mr. Nixon was a worse offender than his predecessors. There is no great difference in wiretapping the Democratic National Committee and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

In one sense, it might even be to Mr. Nixon's credit that he used his private “plumbers” in 1972 rather than perverting the F.B.I. as Lyndon Johnson appears to have done in 1964. Nor does it seem likely that Mr. Nixon knew more of what was being done in his service than Mr. Johnson did, or President Kennedy before that.

Presidents can hardly be impeached in retrospect, and that Mr. Nixon was

not doing much that other Presidents had not done—save his deliberate participation in the post-Watergate cover-up—is not a reason to regard his forced resignation as unfair or unwarranted. Times changed, and placed Mr. Nixon in a different public atmosphere, in the midst of which more became known about the seamier side of his Administration than had been known about any before.

That truth will not spare those of us who condemned Mr. Nixon from the charge of his partisans that we were looking the other way when earlier Presidents were trampling over the Bill of Rights. Nor should it. But a more important point is implicit in that charge although it is not usually conceded by those who make it.

It is that to a great extent such abuses of power as we are learning about are inherent in the existence of this kind of power. That is not to apologize for efforts to drive Martin Luther King to suicide, or to poison Patrice Lumumba, or to wiretap reporters to learn the sources of leaks, as unfortunate aberrations or unavoidable evils—regrettable, but just a part

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of necessary intelligence and security work.

Most of the repellent events recently disclosed had nothing to do with real, rational intelligence or security concerns. Instead, they represented self-serving political acts, the obsessive pursuits of men corrupted by power, the capricious exercises of that power, by those who had it, simply because they *did* have it.

Thus, whatever real problems of Communist subversion from within and without may have threatened the United States since the 1930's, they could hardly have been greater threats to constitutional rights and individual liberty than those that came to be posed by the great security agencies, with their power to operate both in secrecy and in the name of national security, their unlimited budgets, their freedom from supervision—above all, their subservience to political masters who were enabled by the mere existence of such agencies to flout the Constitution and the law for their own political purposes or obsessions.

No one in Congress or the executive branch has even begun to face—let alone answer—the consequent philosophical and institutional questions: Can secret police agencies ever be made compatible with political and intellectual liberty? By what methods of control and accountability can they be made so? Control by whom, accountability to whom?