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# Mr. Nixon: A President Who Tries Too Hard

Post  
4/6/73

The word "Watergate" has become a portmanteau word for all the rascally shenanigans indulged in by supporters of President Nixon, supposedly in the interests of re-electing him. A lot of details about the grubby affair are being uncovered, and there are more to come, but two mysteries remain.

The first mystery is this: as Mr. Nixon himself told a reporter before the election, as soon as it was clear that George McGovern would be the Democratic candidate, it was also clear that Nixon would win, and big. So how could any sane person suppose that it was to the President's advantage to bug Larry O'Brien's office, to pay college kids to work as spies in the McGovern headquarters and the like?

The second mystery is this: from the

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beginning, the Nixon campaign managers had money coming out of their ears, their eyeballs and every other mentionable orifice. So how could any sane person suppose that it was to the President's advantage to cut legal corners, to take large sums from suspected crooks or to cart great mounds of cash around in suitcases?

It may be that there are no sensible answers to these questions, except that seemingly sane people sometimes act in an insane way. And yet it is interesting to speculate about the answers. The place to start is with the President himself. It seems safe to assume that the President had no detailed knowledge, and more probably no knowledge at all, of what was going on.

Mr. Nixon is not at all a fool. It therefore seems obvious that if he had known about the bugging, the money washing, and all the other hanky-panky, he would have recognized the danger instantly, and put a stop to it.

And yet the President sets the tone of his administration, as an experienced hostess sets the tone of her party. The President has, and always has had, one unvarying characteristic—an almost ungovernable impulse to indulge in supererogation: he has a compulsion to go too far, to try too hard, to press, as the athletes say, when he ought to hang loose.

In the 1934 Whittier College yearbook, there is an easily recognizable photograph of a skinny football player with a ski-jump nose and a do-or-die expression. Nixon was, by all accounts, a terrible football player—he was used as a sort of animated tackling bag by the better players, and he hardly ever got into a game. When he did, a football lineman who was a Nixon classmate once told me: "I always braced myself for those 5-yard penalties. Dick was so eager he'd be offside just about every play."

The supererogatory impulse that took the young Nixon off side just about every play has been a hallmark of the President's career. The "old Nixon" was given to rather sleazy debating tricks ("Isn't it wonderful, finally, to have a Secretary of State who isn't taken in by the Communists?"). This sort of thing was not worth a vote to him—in fact, the memory of the "old Nixon" probably elected John Kennedy in 1960. So the things the President said and did in the "rocking, socking" campaigns of his youth seem less a matter of cool calculation than of impulse, of some inner necessity.

These days, the supererogatory impulse takes a somewhat different form. It has repeatedly led him to go too far, to exaggerate each achievement in such a way as to leave him vulnerable later. He called the Apollo 11 flight "the greatest week in the history of the world since the Creation." This

irked his friend Billy Graham and other churchmen, since it rather downgraded the birth of Christ.

He called the Smithsonian agreement (which subsequently collapsed) "the most significant monetary agreement in the history of the world." He has endlessly reiterated that the settlement in Vietnam, a major achievement for which he deserves much credit, is "peace with honor." It is not peace, and he will be left vulnerable when it becomes clear that it is not peace.

A President with a supererogatory impulse attracts around him people with a similar impulse to overdo, to press, to indulge in the superfluous. Charles Colson cannot have helped much with the grandmother vote, when he said that "I would walk over my grandmother if necessary" to insure Nixon's re-election, but the remark was typical enough of a lot of over-eager young men in the Nixon entourage.

"In the campaign, there were maybe a couple of hundred young guys in the White House or near it you and I never heard of," says a Republican senator. "They'd all walk over their grandmothers to elect Nixon, and most of them think a liberal Democrat is next thing to a Communist."

The "couple of hundred young guys" were strictly political amateurs, like the bell-bottomed McGovern youths, initially hailed as geniuses by the gullible press. Like McGovern's bell-bottoms, Nixon's button-downs were essentially ideologues, with the tunnel vision that always leads ideologues to muck things up.

President Nixon has always had curiously few true political pros in his inner circle. In campaign time, the only

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pro fairly close to the throne was Clark MacGregor, who wisely but futilely argued for a policy of lancing the Watergate boil by indignant full disclosure right away.

The other old hands were amateurs. Like many men with long faces who smoke pipes and grunt a lot, John Mitchell acquired a reputation for political shrewdness, but the only thing he did to earn it was to follow his wife's advice to get away from "all those dirty things that go on." Maurice Stans is undeniably expert at squeezing the fat cats, but he squeezed them in such a way as to cause maximum embarrassment to his principal.

Add to the supererogatory impulse and political amateurishness a dash of Walter Mittyism—it is clear that some of the CREEP types who went in for bugging telephones and lugging cash around in suitcases had been watching too much private-eye television—and you have a recipe for disaster. One wonders if the President realizes just how disastrous it may be to his prestige and authority when the Sam Ervin show hits the television screens.

There is a sadness here. President Nixon is an intelligent, able, hard-working man who, as Walter Lippmann said recently, has "done pretty well" at playing a "disagreeable role . . . imposed upon him by historical necessity." In some ways, he has done better than that. The extrication from Vietnam, the detente with the Communist powers, were great achievements. Yet the big things he has done may all be obscured by a silly, tawdry and purposeless exercise in political supererogation.

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