



How Watergate Became Possible

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A PERNICIOUS MYTH which once served to make Watergate seem a mere caper now threatens to blow it up into a supreme national disaster. It is the myth that Watergate is somehow representative of what goes on in American politics.

In fact, the scandal is as unique as a signature. It does not indict the whole political system. In the wake of the latest resignations, the President should have had no great difficulty rebuilding the administration once he faced up to his personal responsibility. But his speech Monday night did not even fill that modest requirement.

What sets Watergate apart is the absence of the usual motives for political vice. The motivating element sprang from the extraordinary relation of President Nixon to the chief White House political aides. Most Presidents draw their assistants from a wide reach of past experience and association.

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BUT MR. NIXON has been a loner in politics. Like many people who travel by themselves, he tends to see ghosts. So he has surrounded himself with political aides whose salient characteristic is fidelity to the boss. In building his staff, Mr. Nixon has been a loyalty freak.

H. R. (Bob) Haldeman rose to be White House chief of staff by political service for one man only — Richard Nixon. John Ehrlichman followed that route to the post of chief adviser on domestic politics. John Mitchell ascended to the office of Attorney General along the same path.

Haldeman, from the beginning, seeded the White House staff with men of equally fervent devotion and narrow focus. He moved a personal protege, Ron Ziegler, in

as press secretary despite the far more impressive experience of Herb Klein. He tried, when it looked as though there would be no Vietnam cease-fire agreement last fall, to "get" Henry Kissinger.

The atmosphere of super-loyalty inevitably affected those few outsiders who managed to penetrate the inner circle. Charles Colson, for example, had served on the staff of Senator Leverett Saltonstall of Massachusetts. But I well remember once when we lunched that he was chewed out by a Haldeman minion for, in effect, consorting with the enemy.

Given that atmosphere, there was nothing the President's men would not do to promote Mr. Nixon's interests. Their loyalties to the man blinded them to the interest of the presidency and the nation. There lies the logic of the bugging, the sabotage campaign, and the cover-up.

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THE RESIGNATION of Messrs. Haldeman, Ehrlichman and Dean means that the President has only to remove the rest of their dependents to clean up the White House.

But before rebuilding the administration can do any good, a critical change must be effected in Mr. Nixon's outlook. His men scrupled at nothing in part because he himself showed such cynical insensitivity to the principles of free government.

So if he now wants to rule effectively, he must himself begin to develop towards the Congress, the judicial system and the media the respect which is the secret of civilized political life. Unfortunately, the speech Monday night with its maudlin sentimentality does not suggest that Mr. Nixon has even begun to understand what is truly the matter with his approach to public office.