

President Nixon's political associates in the 1972 campaign seem not only to have used the very newest devices for wiretapping and electronic surveillance of their opponents but also to have resurrected some of the worst and oldest tricks of traditional corner-saloon politics.

A half-century or more ago, when Tammany Hall and its allies dominated New York City and ingenious rogues like James M. Curley in Boston and "Big Bill" Thompson in Chicago were plying their trade, many of last year's dirty tricks were common practice. Rival factions sometimes sent gangs of toughs to break up one another's rallies.

They spread false rumors. They distributed hand bills and posters ostensibly supporting one candidate but actually designed to offend the ethnic or religious sensibilities of voters in a particular neighborhood. They planted spies to smoke out the plans of the other side. They stole or diverted the other side's campaign literature. Machine politics then was widely regarded as a game and, like today's professional football and hockey, a sometimes brutal, punishing game. Citizens who thought otherwise were derided as "goo-goos" and "silkstocking reformers."

Most Americans had assumed that those rough tactics were a thing of the past, to be read about in novels such as "The Last Hurrah" or in the biographies of half-forgotten political figures. It is astonishing to learn that some of those clean-cut, well-spoken young college men on Mr. Nixon's staff were up to their ears in tactics so fundamentally destructive of democracy. They had a very modern purpose—to influence adversely the television coverage of meetings held by the candidates for the opposing party's Presidential nomination. They used code names and secret mail drops. They called their program "Black Advance" to distinguish it, presumably, from normal advance work done to arrange for a political rally in behalf of one's own candidate.

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Nomenclature aside, it would all have been perfectly familiar to ward heelers in the days of Tweed and Croker. The modern White House men even used paid bullies to attack a speaker at an anti-war demonstration and to disrupt opposition meetings; they actually discussed kidnapping radical dissenters and spiriting them away to Mexico. And the nefarious purpose of these tactics was the same as in the distant past—to knock opponents off stride and to confuse ordinary voters by cunning, force and fraud. These were mean, contemptible tactics when they were employed in the hurly-burly of yesterday's municipal politics, and they are mean, contemptible tactics today when they bear the stamp of the White House.

While such dirty tricks were certainly used in Presidential primaries and national campaigns prior to last year, experienced political observers would agree that their employment at the national level has been but infrequent and sporadic in the past. National candidates and their managers are usually more than glad to leave such maneuvers to local and state supporters, if they countenance them at all. What is extraordinary about the Nixon campaign in this regard is that such tactics were apparently coordinated at the highest staff level in the White House, were begun so far in advance of the actual campaign, and were so far-flung and so lavishly financed.

Even if Mr. Nixon knew nothing of these activities directed against his political opponents, it has to be said that he exercised remarkably poor judgment in choosing senior aides who were willing to take enormous political risks for relatively little gain and to demonstrate the political ethics of storm troopers.