

George F. Will

That Higher (Than the Law) Morality

Add fur rugs and velvet wallpaper to the list of "small, vicious, murky, unimportant, little things" (like reg wigs, big and little shredders, Mr. Ulasewicz's coin changer, etc., etc.) that Mr. Nixon, toasting the emperor of Japan, said will not distract him from the business of making the world even better.

Poor Prime Minister Tanaka wanted to talk about important little things like soybeans. But he arrived at a moment when Mr. Nixon was preoccupied with appearing unpreoccupied with the public's unfathomable desire to wallow in reports about the rugs and wallpaper that—according to yet another Watergate disclosure—were to help Mr. Nixon's agents seduce, photograph and blackmail the friends of Mary Jo Kopechne.

Mr. Tanaka must find the Occident less scrutable than usual these days. His visit began just after John Ehrlichman pronounced the Nixon administration the last, best hope for the defense of family life. And Mr. Tanaka left just as reports about the rugs and wallpaper indicated the depth of administration suspicion that Sen. Edward Kennedy (the target of the blackmail scheme involving Miss Kopechne's friends) falls short of the administration's moral standards.

Having heard Mr. Nixon's toast declaring an avalanche of felonies "unimportant," Mr. Tanaka may have concluded that the administration has no moral passion other than a vaulting admiration for the Borgias' cynicism. But that conclusion is wrong. The emerging truth about the administration is that Messrs. Mitchell, Ehrlichman, Haldeman et al. are idealists, faithful to an elaborate higher morality—"higher," that is, than the law.

True, the administration's higher morality, translated into action, resembles cynicism. But that is only because

its abundant and sincere moral convictions are grotesquely asymmetric.

In my judgment, the administration's bizarre jumble of ethical convictions signifies what grotesquely random and asymmetric beliefs often signify: a particular kind of derangement.

Consider John Mitchell, original symbol of the administration, the "tough cop," fulfillment of Mr. Nixon's most frequently repeated and fervently-felt 1968 campaign pledge, the rescue of the republic from the permissiveness of Ramsey Clark. When the Senate Watergate committee asked Mr. Mitchell if there were anything

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he would not have done to ease the reelection of Mr. Nixon, Mr. Mitchell said he would have thought long and hard about joining his employees in perjury and he almost certainly would have stopped short of treason.

Cynical? I think not. Just a reflection of the administration's unique moral calculus.

Consider Mr. Ehrlichman. He has an open mind about whether Mr. Nixon can order simple robberies. But excessive drinking and what to do about it—there's a clear-cut problem. Mr. Ehrlichman has seen intoxicated legislators "tottering." He is sad because the media do not publicize the bad habits of government officials. He is proud that the White House (surreptitiously) hired Mr. Ulasewicz to snoop into the private habits of public officials. The media, he implies (in a departure from the White House line), are too respectful of public figures.

Excessive drinking (by Democrats) and illicit sex (presumably when not

committed on the administration's fur rugs) offend Mr. Ehrlichman almost as much as does negative nattering about Mr. Nixon's dutiful burglaries. Thus, according to Mr. Ehrlichman's moral calculus, the media should be more indignant about congressional "tottering" and John Dean's honey-moon than about Mr. Nixon's burglaries.

Having diagnosed the asymmetry of the administration's moral convictions, I am prepared to believe that Mr. Ehrlichman is genuinely perplexed by the fact that many people do not approve of Mr. Nixon's use of burglary. He wonders: Don't they understand that national security is served when we confound the knavish Soviets by developing a "negative image" of Daniel Ellsberg? Because the public cannot understand this (Mr. Ehrlichman and Mr. Nixon must now reason) how can we expect it to understand the tapes?

When Mr. Ehrlichman was asked what he thought of the principle that not even a king can trespass without warrant against a humble psychiatrist's cottage, Mr. Ehrlichman said he was afraid that principle had been "eroded." When an unrepentant eroder says he is afraid erosion has taken place, one must conclude one of two things. He is cynical or he is confused to the point of incapacitation.

When people who venerate Billy Graham scheme to use fur rugs to facilitate seductions and blackmail, are they cynical? Or are they bewildered to the point of derangement?

Increasingly, those who try to defend the administration against the suspicion of the latter recognize that they must defend the administration against the charge of sincerity. But if my surmise is correct, the administration is guilty of sincerity. It believes in what it says and in what it does. Now the question is: Is stark raving moral incompetence ground for impeachment?