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The Message Of Egil Krogh

Anybody interested in what's right with America in the hour of Watergate should take a good look at the case of Egil "Bud" Krogh, the former leader of the White House "plumbers" who pleaded guilty the other day. For Krogh, unlike other Watergate defendants who have copped a plea, is not talking to save his own hide.

He is repudiating, as matter of principle, the basic cover cited by the President as justification for illegal acts—the cover of national security. Thus, Krogh is addressing a message to the whole country.

At first blush, Krogh seemed to be only a carbon copy of the other young men who came to work in the Nixon White House. He was a clean-cut, industrious, athletic, church-going family man from the far West (Seattle) who latched onto one of the President's head honchos (John Ehrlichman).

In fact, Krogh was something else. With him the religious feeling was more than skin-deep. He did not earn his brownie points with the boss by picking on easy marks in the press or the antiwar movement. He actually involved himself in issues of substance, and he took on the hard cases.

One of Krogh's responsibilities in the White House was to help that Cinderella, the District of Columbia. Another was to cut the crime rate. A third was to prevent traffic in drugs.

I remember running into him back in 1970 after I had been seeing Ehrlichman in the White House. He introduced himself and said that he had once heard a talk I gave on Vietnam at the University of Washington. He said that he had talked and thought a lot about Vietnam with a professor at the university.

He claimed that they had come up with what seemed to be the right answer. He then named as a solution for Vietnam something that was only interesting because it showed how desperate he was to do right—land reform.

A year later Krogh was put in charge of the White House plumbers, and in that role he played a major part in the burglary of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist in Beverly Hills. In time the law caught up with Krogh, but even then what stood out was his determination to do right.

Krogh was first indicted in California on burglary charges. He entered a plea of not guilty on the ground that he acted under instructions in the interest of protecting national security.

He was subsequently indicted here



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in Washington on charges that he had committed perjury in testifying to the grand jury investigating Watergate. Once again Krogh pleaded not guilty on the ground that his lying was done in the interest of national security.

But in Washington, Krogh came up against one of the truly fine judges on the federal bench, Gerhard Gesell. In the oral arguments, Judge Gesell ripped to ribbons the claim that national security considerations immunized anybody from prosecution for lying under oath in a court of law. As the case crumbled, Krogh saw the point.

Last week he stood before Judge Gesell and switched his plea to guilty.

"I now feel," he said, "that I cannot in conscience assert national security as a defense." In order to show that he was acting on principle, Krogh eschewed the common practice of squealing in return for a light sentence. He is going to be sentenced first, and then talk with the prosecution.

The immediate consequence is to complicate life for some of Krogh's fellow defendants. John Ehrlichman and David Young, two former White House aides who have already been indicted with Krogh in the Los Angeles burglary case, are in deeper trouble than ever. So is Charles Colson who apparently paid out the money for the burglary. Moreover, Ehrlichman may be getting ready to blow the whistle on the President himself.

But the Krogh plea carries a message of far larger import. It says that there is a sense of shame in this country, a conscience. It says that this

country still has a moral bias. It says that individual feelings of right and wrong make a difference.

Those feelings are now working powerfully in the country. That is why, day by day, Mr. Nixon is sinking down, down, down.

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