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William Raspberry

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The 'Liberal Conspiracy'

There is, we are being told, a liberal conspiracy to get rid of President Nixon.

The proof that the conspiracy exists is the fact that every new bit of damning evidence against the President, whether it is directly linked to Watergate or not, is used to buttress demands for impeachment. The proof that it is a liberal conspiracy is the fact that the demands often come from individuals and groups whose politics are left of center.

Columnist William Buckley Jr. said it again the other day, alleging a politically motivated attempt on the part of Mr. Nixon's "enemies" to "formulate a high crime or misdemeanor of which he can be judged guilty."

These enemies, he said, begin with the conclusion that the incumbent must be removed from office and then look for a crime to hang him on.

Buckley is right, to a degree I suppose, but he makes it sound a good deal more sinister than it strikes me. What I see is that some of us (not all of us either liberals or conspirators) have concluded, as Buckley suggests, that the President ought to be removed from office, and some are working to make it happen.

And not because he wasn't our choice for President in the first place, either. For his entire first term, for instance, even while he was shilly-shallying over school integration, killing off the poverty program and offering us G. Harrold Carswell for the Supreme Court, there was not the slightest hint of a move to remove him from office.

There was political opposition, to be sure, and some of us wondered about the sanity of a people who would elect the man to office. But no one that I am

aware of questioned his right to occupy the office.

But the disclosures that followed the Watergate break-in put the Nixon presidency in an entirely different light. What some of us slowly came to see were not just improprieties and repugnant policies but an attempt to transform the system into something alien to the American tradition—an attack on the country, from the inside. If we were outraged at the allegations of huge cash rip-offs, we were truly frightened by the mindset of a national government willing to deal in enemies lists and secret police forces and subversion of official agencies.

It is easy to forget how slowly the conclusion was reached that Richard Nixon was a danger to the country. For most of last year, for instance, it was widely suspected that the President was lying when he denied knowing about the Watergate cover-up.

But he had the benefit of substantial doubt as to any prior knowledge of the Watergate conspiracy, or any personal participation in the cover-up. The general tone, among liberals and nonliberals alike, was that the President should come clean, get rid of the worst members of his staff and apologize to the people. Impeachment was scarcely mentioned.

Since that time, Mr. Nixon has been pursued not by liberal Democrats and "enemies" but by facts and events, more often than not of his own making. His secretly recorded tapes, for instance, might have been a way to have it solidly established whether the President was lying; but he wouldn't let the tapes go. Not only that, but he fired the special prosecutor who had

the nerve to ask for them, and by that act lost two of the most responsible men in his government, along with most of his remaining credibility.

And when he finally had to relinquish the tapes anyhow, two of them turned out not to exist and a third was discovered to contain an 18-½-minute erasure that experts indicate was deliberately made.

He instituted Operation Candor to explain the unexplainable and succeeded in making himself look more suspicious than before on his dealings with the milk lobby and his own income taxes and his real estate deals. (Incidentally, we know that he has ended Operation Candor; but by what name did he call the period that preceded it?)

The more he scurried from one untenable position to another, pretending candor, going silent, losing his tapes and his temper and doing everything he could to keep the facts from coming out, the more he took on the appearance of a trapped criminal.

And as a result, some of us concluded that he no longer was fit to be President. The reason we keep waving each new bit of evidence about is that we are sure we've seen the light and want everybody else to see it, too.

But that is no liberal conspiracy. It isn't the Kennedys and Humphreys who have been in the forefront of those calling for Mr. Nixon to step down. It is voices like the Detroit News and Time Magazine and Wilbur Mills of Arkansas.

Oh, yes, and the AFL-CIO, which has been generally credited with making possible Richard Nixon's landslide election victory.