

By William Safire

ESSAY

WASHINGTON—At 4:35 on the morning of May 10, 1970, as the nation's capital was besieged by demonstrators after the Cambodian incursion, a 30-year-old aide to John Ehrlichman was on duty at a Secret Service command post in the offices used by the Peace Corps.

He heard an amazed voice call out on the police squawk box: "Searchlight is on the lawn!" This meant that the President of the United States had surprised his Secret Service protectors, appeared in the middle of the night on the White House lawn, and was making a foray out into the darkness to mingle with the demonstrators.

The aide hurriedly telephoned his boss, woke him with this information and asked what to do: Sensibly, John Ehrlichman told him to follow the President, introduce himself as a White House aide at an appropriate time and make himself generally useful.

That night, Egil "Bud" Krogh met Richard Nixon for the first time. In the pre-dawn hours at the Lincoln Memorial, Mr. Krogh—a "straight arrow" by all accounts—was profoundly impressed by the awkwardly earnest attempt of the President to communicate with and reassure some young people.

A year later, it was Krogh, the liaison with the Department of Justice on narcotics control and District of Columbia matters, who was given the assignment to stop security leaks. An infuriated President put him in charge of a "special investigations unit" that was to be just about everybody's undoing.

After his sentencing last week, an older and differently-illusioned Mr. Krogh put out a 2500-word statement that should be required reading for anyone thinking of entering Government service.

"The invocation of national security stopped me from asking the question, 'Is this the right thing to do.' . . . To invade [citizens' rights] unlawfully is to work a destructive force upon the nation, not to take protective measure. . . .

"When contemplating a course of action," Mr. Krogh wrote to young people who may enter Government, "I hope they will never fail to ask, 'Is this right?'"

The advice is straightforward enough, yet we can see in his statement how hard it must have been for a man working in a gray area differentiate between black and white.

Egil Krogh was shown the parallel between the Hiss case and the Ellsberg case; he listened to the unchallenged assertions of the C.I.A. that the Soviet Embassy had received a complete set of the Pentagon papers including un-

published secrets; he was told that further hemorrhaging of national security information would jeopardize Vietnam peace negotiations and set back hopes for an end to the arms race with the Soviets.

All this worked on a young man who had seen with his own eyes an emotionally-moved President try and fail to explain his noble motives of peace with honor to a disbelieving group of youths. Mr. Krogh knew that the goal sought by the President was not personal power, but permanent peace.

"Is this right?" never occurred to Mr. Krogh because he saw himself involved in a vast effort to combat so many wrongs, and with so many lives at stake. Although he received no orders from the President to break any laws, Mr. Krogh felt the clutch of circumstance was so extenuating that even burglary could be seen to be in the public interest.

The justification for an immoral or an illegal act is often "the big picture," the righteous cause, which seems to transform transgressions into necessary and noble disobedience to unjust or uncomfortable restrictions. On that basis, Daniel Ellsberg took the Pentagon papers, and Bud Krogh okayed the plumbers' plans to break into the office of Dr. Ellsberg's psychiatrist. (The fact that one man is being canonized and the other canonaded is a twist of irony and not a consequence of logic.)

Here enters the crucial need to ask "Is this right?" out loud. Asked silently of themselves, the question would then have produced a "yes" in both Dr. Ellsberg and Mr. Krogh, hooked as they were on higher laws and greater goods—but asked aloud of at least one superior or friend, the ethical question might have produced a restraining doubt, or a refusal to join in responsibility that would have engendered second thoughts.

The lesson Egil Krogh learned, and is anxious to pass along, goes beyond an understanding that the only national security comes from lawful vigilance. It is senseless to plead "I was only following orders" or in Mr. Krogh's case, "I was only following what I interpreted my orders to mean."

That "Eichmann defense" died with Adolph Eichmann. Taking his medicine without complaint and without falsely passing the blame up or down, Bud Krogh is saying that the moral buck ends with each one of us.

As he jogs around the prison yard, he can take some comfort from the fact that "Is this right?" will be emblazoned across the forehead of every aide to sign on at the White House.