

# The Presidential Connection

By Herbert Mitgang

In the summer of 1923, President Warren G. Harding turned to his Secretary of Commerce, Herbert Hoover, and asked to speak to him in private. When they were alone, the President said to the future President, "If you knew of a great scandal in our Administration, would you for the good of the country and the party expose it publicly or would you bury it?"

Secretary Hoover quickly replied, "Publish it, and at least get credit for integrity on our side."

President Harding thought for a moment, then said that sharing the facts with the public might be politically dangerous. Hoover asked a few probing questions but Harding, he recalled, suddenly "dried up." A few months later the gusher of Teapot Dome spilled over, drowning the era of normalcy in muck.

Will Rogers called it "the great morality panic of 1924," and the phrase can be applied exactly a half-century later to the party, the President and the closing ring around the White House.

The historical link is clear between the troubles of the two Presidents and of their men. Mr. Harding avoided possible impeachment consideration when he died in office before the scandals openly broke around the heads of his cronies. Mr. Nixon is trying to stave off an impeachment recommendation by the House Judiciary Committee while his aides and friends are under indictment in Federal courts in New York and Washington.

The compelling question is: How

strong is the connection of confessed crimes and alleged wrongdoing by his associates on truth and the President—between the principal and his legal agents operating in some cases a few doors down from the Oval Office? Can the machinations of the particular cases be separated from a judgment of the President—or is Mr. Nixon in the public and the Congressional mind an "unnamed defendant" in the trials of his former aides for specific, serious crimes?

"God, I can't be an ingrate," President Harding said, as he paid off the men who had put him over with Cabinet appointments and then looked the other way as they corrupted their offices. His Secretary of the Interior was imprisoned eventually for taking \$125,000 in personal "loans" in return for leasing Government oil reserves; his Attorney General was indicted for a fraud conspiracy.

The indictments against Mr. Nixon's aides go deeper than dollars; the currency was power and corruption of the processes of government. His two closest loyalists, John D. Ehrlichman, ex-domestic affairs assistant, and H.R. Haldeman, ex-chief of staff, are accused of conspiracy, lying to the grand jury and the F.B.I., and obstruction of justice. Likewise, Charles W. Colson, ex-special counsel to the President, is charged with conspiracy and obstruction of justice in covering up the Watergate burglary. Conspiracy, burglary, wiretapping, break-in, illegal campaigning and covert financing—this is the catalogue of high and low crimes in indictments and convictions. For the first time since Teapot

Dome, former Cabinet members are on trial. In Room 110 of the Federal Courthouse in New York—where the Rosenbergs were tried and the first large Communist trial was held twenty-five years ago—former Attorney General John N. Mitchell and former Secretary of Commerce Maurice H. Stans stand accused of perjury, conspiracy and obstructing a major fraud investigation. These intimates of President Nixon received \$200,000 in cash and a \$50,000 check from Robert L. Vesco, the fugitive financier; the secret cash was to be used by the Committee for the Re-election of the President. The *quid pro quo*, according to prosecution witnesses, was to block an investigation by the Securities and Exchange Commission of Mr. Vesco's looting of \$224-million from mutual funds.

The ubiquitous former Presidential counsel, John W. Dean, an unindicted co-conspirator, is testifying in the Mitchell-Stans case this week. He, too, was enlisted to stop the S.E.C. inquiry into the Vesco house of cards. So were President Nixon's brother and nephew used as pressure-points within the Administration by the financier who wanted to be let alone because he gave at the office, the right one. Both the prosecution and the defense seek to make use of White House memos and tapes, as they argued in motions the other day in the Foley Square courthouse, a further reminder of the link between these cases and what President Nixon did or did not say about alleged crimes.

These are links that Mr. Nixon is attempting to becloud in an effort to avoid the damage of guilt by associa-

tion. He has called for a moratorium on Watergate, but there was none on the Teapot Dome investigation. It continued for three years into the Coolidge Presidency. Now, from the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville to the Astrodome in Houston, Mr. Nixon is taking his own case to the people, aware that the feedback from the country as well as documented evidence will go into the House Judiciary Committee count. To some observers the campaign succeeds partially in taking away the play from the court cases; but to others it looks like playing the piano on the Titanic.

Herbert Mitgang is a member of the Editorial Board of The Times.