

Kleindienst Guilty

Former Attorney General Richard G. Kleindienst's guilty plea in the I.T.T. case suggests a dismally low standard of honor that President Nixon maintained for his Administration. Mr. Kleindienst has admitted that he lied to the Senate Judiciary Committee during his confirmation hearings two years ago when he denied that the White House had ever interfered in his conduct of the I.T.T. antitrust case. In reality, President Nixon had personally ordered him to drop an appeal to the Supreme Court in behalf of the Government.

The President knew at the time that Mr. Kleindienst had committed perjury concerning this episode. Yet, he did nothing to correct this deception of a Senate committee and swore Mr. Kleindienst into office as the nation's chief law enforcement officer.

As head of the executive branch of Government, Mr. Nixon was within his rights in intervening in a major antitrust suit if he wished to change the course of policy. But under any theory of free government, an executive has to be accountable to the elected representatives and to the people. Mr. Nixon was not only unwilling to account for his action but permitted his subordinate to conceal it when questioned under oath.

By pleading guilty to a misdemeanor, Mr. Kleindienst has bargained his way out of a possible perjury conviction that would have cost him a prison term and certain disbarment. As it is, he is subject to no more than thirty days imprisonment, and even that penalty may be suspended. This is in marked contrast with the sentence of ten months imposed on Dwight L. Chapin, former Appointments Secretary to President Nixon, for his perjury before a grand jury.

The difference is that Mr. Chapin pleaded innocent and went to trial, while Mr. Kleindienst is cooperating with the Special Prosecutor in providing information on the whole tangled story of the I.T.T. settlement. However valuable Mr. Kleindienst's cooperation may be, the discrepancy between the two sentences once again tends to create an uneasy feeling about "even-handed justice."