

Joseph Kraft

The Watergate Conduct of

So much White House dirty work has been revealed by Watergate that it seems churlish to single out individuals. But a special exception is due in the case of the President's counsel, J. Fred Buzhardt.

Mr. Buzhardt has repeatedly been a central figure in Watergate matters. He still plays a leading role, and his performance expresses the inuggish quality which continues to dominate the Nixon White House even in its approach to the impeachment proceedings.

A good starting point is a press conference given by Buzhardt on May 17. The second question concerned White House tapes and other materials subpoenaed by the House Judiciary Committee. Buzhardt said: "On the last subpoena, it was met in its entirety."

A reporter asked: "Did you really say, as my notes say, the last subpoena was met in its entirety, a subpoena for all tapes, all transcripts, all written memoranda concerning 42 specific conversations? Do you say that edited transcripts of 31 of them means 'in its entirety'?"

Buzhardt replied: "They reveal the substantive material that was subpoenaed. That is what I said."

Five weeks earlier, on April 10, Buzhardt was testifying before the Senate Watergate Committee. The subject was a \$100,000 campaign contribution paid in cash to Bebe Rebozo, the President's friend, by associates of Howard Hughes. Mr. Rebozo and the President had claimed the money had been held in a Florida bank for three years and then returned to Mr. Hughes. Newspaper stories, which appeared just before Buzhardt took the stand, indicated the money might have been doled out to members of the President's family.

Buzhardt acknowledged he had seen the newspaper stories and discussed them. The assistant committee counsel, Terry Lenzner, asked with whom Buzhardt had discussed the stories. Buzhardt said: "I do not recall." Then there took place this exchange:

Mr. Lenzner: "We are talking only about the beginning of this week."

Mr. Buzhardt: "Yes."

Mr. Lenzner: "And you do not have any recollection today, Wednesday, who you may have discussed that with Sunday or Monday."

Mr. Buzhardt: "No, probably someone in the office."

It later developed that Mr. Buzhardt had in fact discussed the matter with Alexander Haig, the White House chief of staff, and with Edward Nixon and with the lawyer of Donald Nixon.

Before that Buzhardt was deeply involved in the 18½ minutes missing from the White House tape of the conversation between the President and his aides H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman on June 20, 1972—the first working day after the Watergate burglary. Buzhardt had assured the Special Watergate Prosecutor in writing that the tapes the prosecutor was seeking through litigation were "being preserved intact."

When the 18½ minutes turned up missing, it developed that Buzhardt had done nothing to preserve the tapes intact. He had done nothing to find out how the 18½ minutes had been erased. Indeed, he contributed to a minimization of the issue by originally claiming that the subpoena did not cover the missing material.

Looking back on the episode, one of the Watergate prosecutors said he made a "mistake in treating Buzhardt as an honorable person." Another claimed that Buzhardt would transfer papers from one White House file to another to block access by the prosecutor. Still a third told of an occasion on which an investigator found a paper whose existence Buzhardt had denied.

To be sure, there is nothing positively criminal in this record. But there is a lot—misrepresentation, corner-cutting, deceit, obstruction—which comes out of the bag of the shyster lawyer representing the seedy con man.

The eyes have to be rubbed and the

J. Fred Buzhardt



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ear pounded to realize that Buzhardt represents the counsel for the President of the United States—a President, moreover, whose basic argument against the Watergate prosecutor and the impeachment proceedings rests on

the majesty of his office. Given such staggering irony, one can only conclude that, at the White House at least, the Watergate cover-up is still in full swing.

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