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Nixon's Love Affair With the Police

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DOUBTS PERSIST as to how the Nixon Administration feels about blacks. Not about blues. For the past few days, the President has been conducting a public love affair with the police.

But the ostentatious show of White House support is apt to have adverse effects on the quality of law enforcement. For the President's rhetoric tilts the wrong way a crucial fight about police practice which is now being fought in most major cities.

Mr. Nixon began wrapping himself in blue after the killing of two patrolmen in New York a fortnight ago. At that time, police officials from around the country were invited to meet at the White House with the President, J. Edgar Hoover, and Attorney General John Mitchell.

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ON HIS VISIT to West Point over Memorial Day, Mr. Nixon moved a bit further. He stopped to chat with a police officer and told him: "this attempt to beat down the military and law enforcement is all part of the same package. Anyone who is basically part of the peace forces, as you are, is subject to criticism, much of it unjustified."

Three days later, at his most recent news conference, Mr. Nixon backed to the hilt the mass arrests made by the Washington police force at the time of the May Day Vietnam protest.

No doubt the identification with the police at this time is good politics. The President may feel that a little whiff of law and order is necessary to hold his right-wing constituency in line.

But what the President gains in public

standing, he is apt to lose in law enforcement. For that cause depends on the outcome of the battle over the role of the police which is now going forward in most major cities.

In New York, for example, Police Commissioner Patrick Murphy has been cooperating with a committee of the State Legislature working to expose the close ties that bind the metropolitan police to the traffickers in hard drugs. That investigation has been resisted by most of the police brass.

In Dallas, Cincinnati, Kansas City, and other smaller cities, progressive police chiefs are trying to move beyond mechanization and computerization to establish a force that has a genuine rapport with local neighborhoods and local needs. But their efforts are being resisted by old-line police officials backed by police unions and large sections of the public.

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IN THESE circumstances, Mr. Nixon's blanket endorsement of the police is an act of intervention by the highest American official in a closely fought struggle between the good guys and the bad guys of the law enforcement community.

By indiscriminate endorsement of the police, by asserting that most criticism is unjustified and that the military and the police are part of "the same package," Mr. Nixon helps those who seek to keep the police as they are — a special institution, above common — sensical scrutiny and not truly subject to change or even control. He works against the good guys who seek, over very heavy odds, to improve police practice.