

The White House "Attack Group" and Its Assignment

By John Osborne *

A NIXON ASSISTANT, Patrick Buchanan, has on his desk a copy of Robert Sam Anson's biography of Senator George McGovern (McGovern—Holt, Rinehart & Winston; \$7.95). Many passages are underlined. The one most heavily marked, the one Buchanan calls "that baby" and reads aloud with

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loving joy, quotes McGovern as follows on his unsuccessful effort to defeat Senator Karl Mundt of South Dakota in 1960: "It was my worst campaign. I hated him so much I lost my sense of balance. I was too negative. I made some careless charges. When the media in the state turned against me, the television and radio stations and almost all the newspapers, I got kind of rattled. I got on the defensive. I started explaining and answering things I should have ignored. It was hard to get a hook in Mundt."

McGovern on McGovern in this passage is one of the texts that Buchanan and the five other members of Richard Nixon's White House "attack group" rely upon in their daily, incessant watch upon the senator's campaign performance and their attendant effort to spot and make the most of his mis-

in Colson's absence and is regarded at the reelection committee, where the strong White House hand is resented, as the group's dominant member. Albert E. Abrahams, a public relations specialist who moved from the White House to the committee soon after MacGregor did, also sits with the group and acts for MacGregor when Failor is occupied elsewhere.

THE ORIGINAL assignment of the attack group was to get George McGovern down. Now it is to keep him down. Its visible way of doing this is to track his every word and action, partly from press reports and partly from the personal and more or less covert observation that occurs in all national political campaigns and has been brought to an



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takes and weaknesses. In their roles as the working tacticians of the Nixon campaign, the assistants who provide Vice President Agnew, Cabinet members and some 50 lesser surrogates with ideas and suggestions for jabs at McGovern, the members of the attack group are under orders from the President and his staff chief, R. H. Haldeman, to keep their assignment and even the office where they convene hidden from the press.

The senior attacker is Charles Colson, special counsel to the President, a lawyer who spends a lot of time with Mr. Nixon and none at all, nowadays, with reporters who have him rightly tagged as the assistant in charge of dirty tricks. The others are Ken W. Clawson, until last February a first-rate newspaper reporter who was recruited by Colson to be the President's deputy director of communications; Pat Buchanan, a conservative writer who is among the few genuine ideologues left among the pragmatists in Nixon's service; Wallace Johnson, a White House lobbyist who represents William Timmons, the chief lobbyist, in the attack group; and Edward Failor, a special assistant to Clark MacGregor, a former Minnesota congressman and White House assistant who replaced former Attorney General John N. Mitchell as the director of the Committee to Reelect the President after the bugging of the Democratic headquarters was discovered last summer. Failor chairs the attack group

unprecedented level of skill and thoroughness in the Nixon campaign. Nixon observers are present at every McGovern appearance just as—or so the Nixonites assume—McGovern observers are at every Nixon and Nixon surrogate performance. The Nixon tacticians have arranged, as they assume their McGovern counterparts have, to have friendly watchers and informants in newspaper offices, television and radio studios and, where and as they can manage it, among the opponent's workers and supporters at campaign centers from the national headquarters down to precincts.

This is standard campaign procedure, within accepted political norms. There is, however, factual basis for the impression that the Nixon people, endowed with more campaign money than is good for them and imbued with a driving ambition to amass for the President the biggest popular majority in recent times, have stretched the accepted procedures to extreme and, even by the loose standards of applied politics, dishonorable lengths. The Washington Post reported recently that FBI investigators of the Democratic headquarters bugging had come upon evidence of a deliberate and elaborate Republican effort to disrupt the Democratic

ling who by nature and character is compelled to make the kind of mistakes he confessed to making in the 1960 Mundt campaign. The immediate architect of these tactics is Colson. The chief implementer and frequent deviser of them is Clawson. The immediate overseer is Bob Haldeman. The actual and ever-watchful overseer of the entire operation is President Nixon.

The President's part in the operation is never discussed or willingly disclosed at the White House. Three of his directives to the attack group and to the many others involved in the operation are known, however. One of his earliest orders was that, given a choice of tone and manner, the harsh and vengeful note that he himself struck in the 1970 midterm campaign should be avoided in favor of a gentler, low-key approach. Another was that the words "Democratic" and "Democrats" be avoided whenever possible, except in references to Democrats for Nixon. The partisan term was to be shunned with particular care in references to the administration's congressional opposition and to the rivals of Republican candidates for Congress. A third Nixon order, the best example of his intervention in specific situations, was that nobody connected with him or his candidacy for reelection was to say a word about Senator McGovern's decisions

primary campaigns and eliminate George McGovern's competitors for the nomination with hired spies and saboteurs. One of The Post allegations was that Ken Clawson, one of the attack group, had faked and personally written a published newspaper letter that contributed to the collapse of Senator Edmund Muskie's try for the nomination. Clawson came to the White House from The Post. One of his friends and former colleagues there, Marilyn Berger, said that he told her on September 25, "I wrote the letter." Clawson told his former editors, who didn't seem to believe him, that he had nothing to do with the letter and that Miss Berger must have misunderstood him. Miss Berger said that she didn't misunderstand him: "He said it and I stand by it." Beyond saying after prolonged questioning that Clawson still had the President's confidence, Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler refused to back up Clawson's denial with a White House denial. Ziegler's evident purpose, as it has been throughout the spate of reports and allegations about misused and secret campaign funds, electronic bugging and the like, is to keep the President as far as possible from the accumulating dirt pile. And Clawson hasn't offered to quit and hasn't been asked to quit. He was going about his business in the attack operation with his usual aggressive skill.

THE COLSON-CLAWSON operation is remarkable in its visible aspects only for its deadly and thorough persistence. Its principal aim was and is to rob George McGovern of the quality that he has done so much to impair. The quality is (or was) his reputation for courage, decency and credibility. In the guidelines that go out from the attack group to Cabinet members, the Vice President and other high-ranking surrogate speakers for Nixon, and through the reelection committee to lesser spokesmen, the real or manufactured differences between the positions that McGovern took in his primary campaigns and the modified positions that he takes now are ruthlessly emphasized. The object is to depict him as an inconsistent and unstable radical, a waffler, a shrill weak-

first to retain and then to dump his first vice presidential nominee, Senator Thomas Eagleton. The President appears to have perceived at the time, sooner than most of his counselors did, that the Eagleton affair would prove to be the disaster for McGovern that it has turned out to be, the seemingly ineradicable evidence in the public mind that he is indeed the indecisive and unstable changeling that the White House attackers industriously try to make him out to be.

The single permitted departure from this general approach has to do with McGovern's Vietnam and defense positions. On these, he is depicted on the President's orders as a beggar for peace, an advocate of surrender, a wrecker of essential national security. Mr. Nixon lets others say it, implies it himself, but never says it directly of McGovern. The most interesting facet of the 1972 campaign is the way in which the Nixon pose of impersonal detachment has worked for him and against Senator McGovern. It has had, all too often, the effect upon the senator that McGovern hoped and is still trying to have upon Nixon. It is McGovern, not Nixon, who has been driven to the harsh and shrill extremes that have been Nixon trademarks. The ultimate irony is that they are in character for Richard Nixon, out of character for George McGovern.

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