



Why Nixon Doesn't Pick Up the Phone

James Kilpatrick

PRESIDENT NIXON'S bare-backed bout with the bronco press has to be ranked among the finest sports spectacles of the year. Last week's event was in the best bull-throwing tradition of the rodeo. Everybody got bruised but no one got badly hurt. The President won on points, but the press scored impressively, too.

The most revealing moment of the afternoon came when Mr. Nixon was trying to explain why he himself didn't communicate with government prosecutors last spring. He said that he assumed that John Dean, and later John Ehrlichman, were doing the communicating for him. Then he said:

"The President doesn't pick up the phone and call the Attorney General every time something comes up on a matter. He depends on his counsel, or whoever he's given the job to."

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THIS WAS the quintessential Nixon speaking: "The President doesn't pick up the phone." The sentence came out like a hiccup. It was an afterthought, a further comment that went beyond the answer he had given already; he didn't need to say it — but in that unexpected moment of truth we learned something about Mr. Nixon and why he is in the fix he is in.

It simply is not a part of Mr. Nixon's nature to "pick up the phone." Suppose, to be supposing, that Mr. Nixon's nature were otherwise. Suppose that in June of 1972, after the implications of the Watergate break-in began to emerge, the President had seized a telephone and given some orders to a White House operator:

"Get me John Mitchell on the line. Then get me Gordon Liddy. What's Jeb Magruder's number?" In ten seconds — the White House operators are the most efficient professionals in the world — they have John Mitchell waiting on hold. It is 10 o'clock on the morning of June 22. "John," says the President, "what the hell is going on? Give me the chapter and verse."

But history, they say, is only biography; events are no more than the lengthened shadow of men who make them. Because Nixon was Nixon, he could not "pick up the phone." He is a creature of self-discipline and established order. He goes through channels. So he rings the buzzer for Bob Haldeman. "Bob," he says, "tell John Dean to look into this Watergate business." And he turns to his morning appointments.

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I HAVE a hunch that some such scenario actually was played in the White House 14 months ago. To an extraordinary degree, Mr. Nixon "depends on his counsel, or whoever he's given the job to." Such an attitude is at once the genius and the curse of the top executive. Duties have to be delegated — of course they must be delegated! — but the rules of delegation can be obeyed to excess. Mr. Nixon depended, and he got: Watergate.

It might do President Nixon a world of good — it might win him, not respect, but understanding and even affection instead — if more often he would pick up the phone himself.