

# Nixon Never Did

By William Safire

WASHINGTON—Amidst the rash of books and magazine series rehashing all the frightful things Richard Nixon did, it might be useful to recount just a few of the items he has not yet been accused of having done.

1. *Nixon never ordered the murder of a fellow chief of state.* Recent accounts have alluded to the way the Kennedy brothers, fuming over the Bay of Pigs fiasco, might have had a little something to do with C.I.A. and Mafia activity in connection with Fidel Castro. We will never know the full story about this, because no Congressional committee will put a dozen witnesses under oath to testify about their involvement, but enough has surfaced to justify suspicion that President Kennedy did not frown on murder as a tool of national policy.

2. *Nixon never ordered the Justice Department not to prosecute a case that the Internal Revenue Service sent over with a recommendation for prosecution.* The Kennedy brothers did this in the Sherman Adams case, infuriating the I.R.S. professionals; in the post-Watergate morality, such conduct in quashing the prosecution for political gain would be labeled "obstruction of justice."

3. *Nixon never ordered the extended wiretapping of a civil rights leader for the purpose of leaking derogatory information about him to the press.* Certainly the deposed President's eavesdropping proclivities were reprehensible, but his motive was the plugging of national security leaks. The tapping of Martin Luther King Jr. approved by Attorneys General Robert Kennedy and Nicholas Katzenbach had no such justification, and the deliberate playing of such taped conversations to reporters and Congressmen violated Federal law.

The Justice Department has recently admitted that the purpose of the King tap was "investigating the love life of a group leader for dissemination to the press." As Harvard Law Prof. Alan Dershowitz has recently written in *The New Republic*, "The King intrusions involved the taping of as many as 5,000 separate conversations that violated the privacy of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of innocent King callers and visitors." And nobody ever sued.

4. *Nixon never amassed millions of dollars in public office.* One of his aides went to jail for backdating a deed that would have saved his boss a bundle, but Nixon did not enter public life a poor man and emerge a generation later with a net worth over \$14 million, as his predecessor did. Fortunately for President Johnson, Senator Sam Ervin was there to cast

a ringing vote against a Senate investigation into the activities of long-time Johnson intimate Bobby Baker.

5. *Nixon never used the F.B.I. or C.I.A. to spy on political opponents.* Wrongly, Nixon hired his own "plumbers." But he never ordered the F.B.I. to examine the telephone records of a Vice-Presidential candidate, as Lyndon Johnson did with Spiro Agnew in 1968. Nor did Nixon get the F.B.I. to snoop on Robert Kennedy at the 1964 Democratic convention (no honor among tappers) as L.B.J. did. A *New York Times* editorial referred to one of these taxpayer-supported dirty tricks as "an even graver offense than the original Watergate break-in."

Nor did Nixon order the illegal surveillance of the Mississippi Freedom party at that well-bugged 1964 Democratic convention; curiously, nobody seems to want to go to court to discover who did.

6. *Nixon never lied to the people about his health just before an election.* We have known for about a year that F.D.R. knew he was dying in 1944 and concealed that fact from the voting public with the connivance of his doctor. Only recently have we learned from Ben Bradlee that John F. Ken-

## ESSAY

nedy referred privately to "my Addison's disease" and fretted about his face appearing puffed up because of prolonged cortisone treatment.

In 1960, when Democratic committeeewoman India Edwards charged that candidate Kennedy was afflicted with Addison's disease and that the required treatment called into question his capacity to serve, Kennedy and his doctors put out a misleading statement about a "mild adrenal deficiency." Lying to the people is always wrong, as Mr. Nixon learned, but lying to them about a material fact concerning ability to perform just before voters are called upon to make their decision—as we now find Senator Kennedy did—that has a special poignance.

Those are some of the things that Nixon never did. Of course, we would know a great deal more about other things he never did if Congress were to spend one-tenth the time and money investigating previous Administrations that it expended on Mr. Nixon's. But that is not to be.

So let us smack our lips as we pore over the pages that recount the villainy of the early seventies. We need to reassure ourselves that the Good Guys, who won at last, were really the good guys all along. Isn't that much more fun than forcing ourselves to look at the things Nixon never did?

Point by point rebuttal by Frank Mankiewicz, WXP 9 Jun 75, this file.  
See also Safire, NYT 20 Jun 75.