

Measuring Past Presidents

William Safire, once my opponent in three debates in these pages during the 1972 presidential campaign and now a columnist for The New York Times, wrote a most disturbing column last Friday. It was entitled, "Nixon Never Did," and it listed six non-sins of our ex-President, all of which, according to Safire, other Presidents did commit. NYT 5 JUN, THURS

Now Safire, as a literate Nixon bitter-ender, is entitled to claim any virtue he wishes for his former chief, and all this would ordinarily rate would be a sad "say-it-isn't-so-Bill" from his friends. But this particular column is disturbing because it is representative of a well-orchestrated campaign on the part of die-hard believers in Nixon's innocence to make us forget the hard-earned lessons of Watergate by encouraging us to believe that all recent Presidents shared Nixon's genuinely and uniquely low moral standards. It is precisely because of their increasing currency and their patent unfairness to other former Presidents that Safire's apologies for Nixon deserve a point-by-point rebuttal.

① Item: *Nixon never ordered the murder of a fellow chief of state.* Here Safire refers to "recent accounts" that John and Robert Kennedy "might have had a little something to do with CIA and Mafia activity in connection with Fidel Castro." That "little something" gives it away; it is an arch way to say "a lot." Safire goes on: "... enough has surfaced to justify suspicion that President Kennedy did not frown on murder as a tool of national policy." This is a truly outrageous smear, since nothing has "surfaced."

What Safire is talking about is two leaks straight from the Rockefeller Commission, reciting a memo from an old CIA hand, Gen. Edward Lansdale, to the effect that assassination was an option in dealing with Castro. One recent Friday night, Lansdale seemed to tell a reporter he had written the memo in response to pressure from Robert Kennedy, acting for the President. But later the same night, Lansdale took it all back, and wound up by saying that neither Kennedy had ever communicated with him in any way about assassination. Now that Lansdale has retracted and Rockefeller's report has been withheld, one would think the Nixon men would give up the chase. The only evidence to surface so far about the Mafia is that during the Eisenhower years the CIA made some kind of arrangement with two Mafiosi with respect to a contract on Castro, and that Robert Kennedy, when he heard about it, stopped it cold.

② Item: *Nixon never ordered the Justice Department not to prosecute a case that the Internal Revenue Service sent over with a recommendation for prosecution.* The reference is to the case of Sherman Adams, spared by President Kennedy so as not to embarrass his predecessor, Eisenhower. The key words are "with a recommendation for prosecution." Nixon men stopped IRS investigations of his friends and urged IRS prosecution of his famous "enemies." There is an old New England saying, "never mention the word

Safire says "that FDR knew he was dying" in 1944 and concealed that fact from the voters. But there is no proof—hardly any evidence—that FDR knew any such thing. He also refers to a pre-convention charge in 1960, by LBJ supporters, that JFK was suffering from Addison's disease, and the Kennedy camp's subsequent reference to a "mild adrenal deficiency." To prove his point, Safire uses a Kennedy remark about "my Addison's disease"

Mr. Mankiewicz, a Washington journalist, was press secretary to Robert Kennedy and national political director of George McGovern's 1972 campaign.

'rope' in the house of a man who has been hanged": If I were a Nixon defender, I would be the last man to use the words "Internal Revenue Service."

③ Item: *Nixon never ordered the extended wiretapping of a civil rights leader for the purpose of leaking derogatory information about him to the press.* This is a reference to a single wiretap and extensive bugging of Martin Luther King. Since the recordings of some of the bugs were played later to the delectation of some members of the press and the FBI men who furnished them, the matter deserves some discussion.

As Attorney General, Robert Kennedy approved one wiretap on the office of Martin Luther King. The purpose was to attempt to prove or disprove a charge—by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover—that a secret Communist was working for King. The results

"Safire's column is representative of a well-orchestrated campaign on the part of die-hard believers in Nixon's innocence to make us forget the lessons of Watergate."

were negative, the tap was discontinued, and no recordings were ever played, anywhere. But Hoover—on his own and without any authorization (no one has ever claimed any authorization)—had been bugging King's hotel rooms around the country and making the tapes available as part of his campaign to destroy King's standing and credibility.

Now, as to Nixon. He ordered the wiretapping of newsmen and members of his own staff—including, incidentally, Mr. Safire. And his White House staff—probably with his knowledge—organized, financed and carried out a burglary against an anti-war leader "for the purpose of leaking derogatory information about him to the press. Nixon then joined a "cover-up" of that crime. As for Safire's defense that Nixon's motive in wiretapping was "the plugging of national security leaks," he must think we have no memory at all. Most of those tapped (including Safire) had no connection with security, we have all read the transcript of the conversation in which Nixon and his aides created the "national security" defense, and we even have the notation opposite one "enemy" target: "a little scandal here would be helpful."

in Benjamin Bradlee's "Conversations With Kennedy." But Bradlee himself believes that Kennedy was making a characteristically wry and facetious reference to a report about the President's health that appeared at that time in Newsweek (then Bradlee's employer). This is thin stuff to match up against Nixon's use of the CIA and the FBI to obstruct justice, and then

④ Item: *Nixon never amassed millions of dollars in public office.* To which, I guess, the short answer is "not for lack of trying." While President, he acquired estates at San Clemente and Key Biscayne (and we don't yet know how or with whose money) and maintained and furnished them largely at government expense. And Nixon's 1969 tax return, based as it was on lies about his place of residence in order to evade capital gains taxes, and a fraudulently-dated deed of gift of largely worthless papers, succeeded for a while in sheltering nearly one million dollars of present and future income. He still has the estates, by the way, and he still holds nearly \$170,000 of our money he promised to return.

Safire's reference is to Lyndon Johnson, whose wife's net worth increased by several million dollars while he was President, due to the increasing value of a monopoly TV station in Austin. Now it may be true that FCC officials were mindful of the station's ownership when renewal time came around, or conceivably when applications were made for licensing of a competing station. But if LBJ ever intervened, there is no evidence of it. And with John Mitchell and Richard Kleindienst as Attorneys General and Will Wilson and Henry Peterson as Assistant Attorneys General in charge of the Criminal Division, is there any doubt that if a scrap of paper implicating LBJ could have been found during the Nixon years, it would have been found?

⑤ Item: *Nixon never used the FBI or the CIA to spy on political opponents . . . Nor did Nixon get the FBI to snoop on Robert Kennedy at the 1964 Democratic convention, as LBJ did.* Nixon may never have used the FBI for this purpose, but if so it was only because Hoover wanted it in writing and, anyway, John Ehrlichman didn't trust Hoover. But what in God's name was the "plumbers" all about? These were White House assistants, and they did hardly anything but spy on political opponents. If Nixon did not spy on Robert Kennedy, it is only because he was never in a position of power when RFK was more than a Senate Committee chief counsel. But to make up for it, Nixon did have his White House gumshoes spy on Edward Kennedy, surely a comparable offense.

⑥ Item: *Nixon never lied to the people about his health just before an election.* What a sad commentary it is that, in defending an ex-President of the United States, his friends must qualify the phrase, "he never lied to the people," with a particular subject and a particular time. If Nixon never lied to us about his health just before an election, that may well be one of the few things he didn't lie to us about. This is the famous "Maurice Stans defense," in which overwhelming evidence of guilt is met by an assertion that complicity has not been proved in the sinking of the Andrea Doria. The things Nixon did lie about were not exactly trifling—for examples, the Paris Peace Accords, the Cambodian bombing and subsequent "incursion" and, most important, just about every phase and aspect of Watergate.

lying about it. But then, if your champion only told the truth in a limited area, it's wise to concentrate on it.

There are some things Nixon actually did not do, which other Presidents did. The most important one, I guess, was to maintain our belief in the basic honesty and decency of our leaders. We could start our list with that, and end it with that, too.