

The Odds in Washington

On the wall in my office in Las Vegas hangs a framed cartoon by Jim Berry, which shows John Mitchell leaning over the shoulder of Richard Nixon. "I don't care what Gallup or Harris says," reads the caption, "tell my what Jimmy the Greek says."

It was the original cartoon, inscribed by both the artist and the 37th President of the United States. Herb Klein, Mr. Nixon's press secretary back in the Eisenhower days, and later his communications director, mailed it to me. Klein was my contact at the White House.

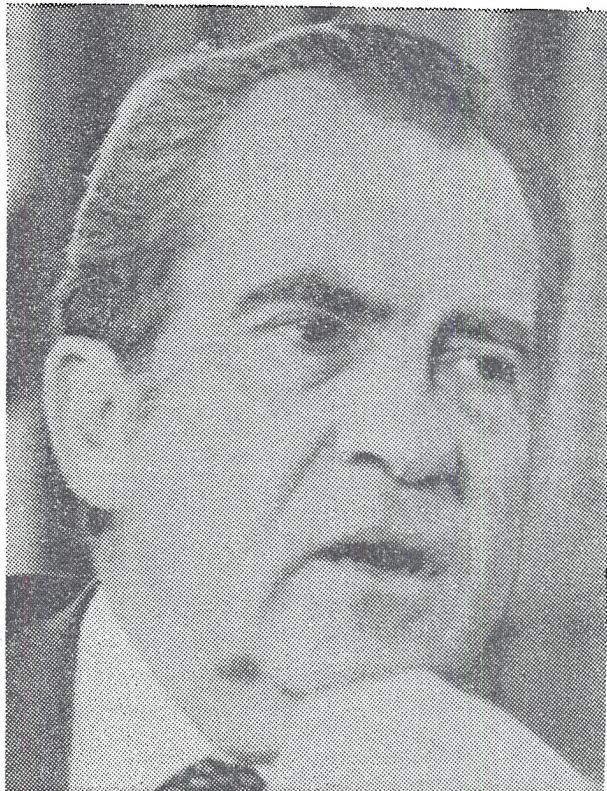
I could be the greatest odds-maker in the world — and I am — and I would not have wanted to quote you odds in the spring of 1972 that Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew would resign shamed and broken men. Would anyone?

I am often asked, almost accusingly, if polls influence elections. As events of that period unfolded, I would have to suspect that they influenced a good deal more. Let me back up a bit, to July, 1970, to a meeting in Chicago with Jack Anderson, who wanted me to establish odds and provide the polling for his syndicated political column.

Two months later Anderson released our poll. It showed Edmund Muskie comfortably in front for the Democratic nomination. But more than that, we had established Muskie as a 7-to-5 favorite over Nixon.

Not long after Anderson's column appeared, I ran into Herb Klein in Los Angeles. He seemed cool.

"Herb," I said, "don't be peeved with me because I made the President an underdog to Muskie. That's the way it figured. If anything, the odds could have been a little higher."



RICHARD NIXON
An underdog to Muskie

What I didn't know, had no way of knowing until much later, was the wild reaction that poll had caused in and around the White House. A Nixon aide would testify before the House Judiciary Committee that the Dirty Tricks Squad was organized soon after, to stop Ed Muskie, harass his campaign and neutralize the lead that a poll — my poll, in Anderson's column — showed him holding over the President.

Jimmy the Greek