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Candidate Nixon is not entitled to silence on campaign issues

WASHINGTON—President of the United States Richard Nixon is also candidate Richard Nixon and the suspicion is growing that he doesn't understand the difference.

As President, Mr. Nixon is entitled to silence on matters which affect his countrymen. Many of us would like to know, for example, precisely what he told Chou En-lai about what we would do if Russian armies attacked China or if Russian nuclear missiles attempted to wipe out China's nuclear plant. Many of us would like to know, too, what he said to Russia's Leonid Brezhnev on this subject and on others.

But as President of the United States, Mr. Nixon is entitled to our trust and our confidence that we do not "need to know."

As candidate for President, however, Mr. Nixon is not entitled to this same trust concerning the governance of his political party.

Surely, he is not entitled to remain silent while members of his campaign staff and employes in the White House offices of his administration engage in wiretapping.

At the least, we are entitled to have answers to the following questions:

1. Does he have any explanation for the fact that a wiretapping device and a floor plan of the Democratic National Committee offices were found in the desk drawer of one of his White House assistants?

2. Or for the fact that one of his campaign assistants was caught red-handed by the police trying to remove a wiretap inside the offices of the Democratic National Committee?

3. Or that his former secretary of commerce and present campaign finance chief disbursed a check for \$25,000 in such a manner that it wound up in the pockets and bank accounts of those caught tapping wires?

4. Or that one of his aides has disappeared without a trace, another has resigned with the excuse that his wife is pregnant and a third has refused to give testimony to the FBI?

Surely candidate Nixon must realize that it is an insult to the public for his campaign staff to insist before a court of law that none of these questions can be answered or even discussed until after the election because to answer or discuss them might influence the election.

It is odd how long it takes—given the instant communications in this country—for the public to sense a scandal and to work up an outrage about it. George McGovern, campaigning recently in the Midwest, asked union members in a small hall to raise their hands if they had ever heard of the bugging of the Democratic National Committee. Only about half the crowd did so. McGovern commended that it was a better informed audience than most.

But then he went on to his peroration which is becoming standard McGovern speech fare. "I'm going to talk about this from every platform in America until the President of the United States sees fit to tell us who was involved in these wiretaps and what he's going to do about it."

It's a campaign promise McGovern will be able to keep and every time he makes it, it hurts not only Mr. Nixon but the whole process by which Americans select a President.

There are grave issues in this campaign. There are the issues of tax equity, of defense policy, of the power of the President to conduct a war Congress has not sanctioned. There may be even graver questions which have not yet been defined.

It is fair for McGovern to say that one of the issues is secret surveillance and wiretapping because the Nixon Administration has made greater use of such espionage and has more vehemently defended its use than any administration in history.

But the bugging of the Democratic National Committee should not be the central issue of this campaign. Unless President Nixon recognizes his responsibilities as candidate Nixon, it bids fair to become so.