

Alarms, Diversion—and Responsibilities

In a triple headed broadside two days ago, the administration, the Committee for the Re-election of the President and the Republican National Committee attacked the news media—and this newspaper in particular—for the way in which they have been presenting information to the public about the nature and character of some of the effort to re-elect Mr. Nixon. The full text of one of those attacks, that of Clark MacGregor, the President's re-election campaign director, is printed elsewhere on this page today so that you can judge it in its entirety.

In our view it is important first to get its essence straight. The charges really hinge on the question of whether there is something going on here that the people should know about. Or whether, conversely, the press is manufacturing sludge out of some ugly instinct or some malicious partisanship that seeks, without honor, the sinking of Richard Nixon's ship of state.

Our own judgment on these questions begins with the observation that it was not the press in general nor The Washington Post in particular nor George McGovern (at least as far as we can discover) who put five burglars in the Democrats' headquarters in the wee hours of the morning of June 17. But, the burglars were there and they were apparently installing surveillance devices and the natural questions of an intelligent person or a diligent journalist then had to flow. What were they doing there? Who sent them? Who paid them? Was this their own lark or were they part of some gaudier design that we and others were not only curious about, but had some right to know about? Who was to receive their product—the illegally obtained information?

So two Post reporters began to dig for the answers to these questions and to others that presented themselves as they began to find out more . . . and more. As usual in any big story in any town, they found people who knew things and who wanted, for one reason or another, to talk about what they knew. Some of the people were willing to talk for attribution and others, for their own reasons wanted anonymity. All stories were checked and cross checked and none was printed until the reporters and their editors were satisfied that what The Post was being told was a) not irresponsible and b) could be confirmed by supplementary information and, c) was from sources who were in a position to know what they were talking about. Although some of the people who have talked to us have wanted to protect their identities, The Post has printed nothing which it is not prepared to back and nothing which the natural development of the story — as opposed to malice or partisanship—has not led us to.

That brings us to the Republicans' charges; essentially they boil down to a charge that we have been motivated in this by partishanship for Senator McGovern, that we have refused to examine charges of espionage against Nixon campaign activities, and that we have been blind to the similarities between the case of Daniel Ellsberg and that of, say, G. Gordon Liddy; and finally that we have attempted to

divert people from the main issues of the campaign because the polls are favorable to the President. Since we didn't manufacture the burglary or the GAO report of Republican funds, being laundered through Mexico, or the \$700,000 stuffed into a suitcase and rushed to Nixon headquarters in a corporate jet or any of the rest of it for that matter, the charge of partisanship fails; journalistic curiosity and enterprise would be reason enough to dig deeper into a burglary and illegal electronic espionage at Democratic National Party headquarters.

Then, Mr. MacGregor talks about "proven facts of opposition-incited disruptions of the President's campaign." Our reporters have, in fact, looked into them and "the proven facts" don't seem to amount to much. In one case cited, the McGovern people do admit that anti-war militants were using their phones for anti-war purposes and when they discovered it, they stopped them. In the Hollywood incident, the Los Angeles Police Department reports that the damage to the Nixon office was the inadvertent offshoot of a robbery in an adjacent office, which had nothing whatever to do with politics. In another of Mr. MacGregor's "proven" incidents, the head of the New York Nixon committee reports that there is absolutely no evidence to link the window breaking with McGovern forces. So it goes with Mr. MacGregor's "proven . . . opposition-incited disruptions."

Mr. MacGregor's Ellsberg analogy also fails. Mr. Ellsberg is charged with illegally violating a trust with respect to documents which had lawfully come into his hands. The Watergate burglars—including two who had worked for the White House—are charged with breaking and entering in the night, not just to burglarize, but also to tap phones and to bug offices. Mr. Ellsberg was, to all intents and purposes, working alone and in his own way, to stir public opposition to the Vietnam war. He was not enlisted even remotely, in a covert campaign on behalf of the re-election of a President of the United States.

That brings us to the major charge, the assertion that The Post has tried to suggest the appearance of "a connection between the White House and the Watergate—a charge which The Post knows . . . to be false." The first thing to be said is that the Post is not trying to make connections, but rather to find out the whole story and tell it as best we can. The second thing to be said for what it is worth, is that there were connections between the Watergate itself and the White House: E. Howard Hunt, one of the men indicted for the break in was a White House consultant who still had a White House office at the time of the break in and G. Gordon Liddy, another of the indicted men, had been a White House employee.

But, those are not the major points, which have to do with the uncontroverted facts already turned up in this story and with the way the administration and the Nixon campaign have chosen to deal with them. The stories about the break-in, the sabotage, the surreptitious campaign financing and the slush

fund controlled by people extremely close to the President—all these go far beyond the Watergate. They go to the character of the campaign to re-elect Richard Nixon, to the character of the men around him and who have helped him govern. Those questions go to the way those people regard the American people. That, it seems to us, is so basic to this campaign as to be the very opposite of "diversionary."

Administration spokesmen on Monday chose to attack the media rather than to deal with the facts. This response has characterized their conduct throughout the whole sorry business. Throughout it all they have chosen to ask the people to trust them—to print their denials without giving the press or the people the facts on which those denials are based. In essence they have been asking us to accept and to pass on to the public what amounts to hearsay from the administration and the President. Mr. Nixon, for example, assures us that his counsel, Mr. John Dean has done an investigation which clears everyone in sight and he asked us to pass this along without proving a shred of evidence for it. And we did so because that is our job. But we would have much preferred to pass on the administration's forthright, first hand account; if the facts are as innocuous as Mr. MacGregor suggests, we fail to understand why that account has not been forthcoming. The administration, for example, could have moved for a speedy trial in the Watergate affair. Or it could have accepted Mr. Patman's invitation to send up everybody knowledgeable about the whole affair—including Messrs. Clawson, Kalmbach, Chapin, Segretti, Stans and Mitchell—to testify under oath in full view of the American people. Instead it has refused "to dignify . . .", denied all knowledge, declined to entertain questions—and lashed out blindly at those who will not take all this on faith.

In the end, it is up to the people to define what is or is not important as an issue in this campaign. If they are indifferent to burglary, sabotage, forgery, sleazy money, guns in brief cases and hundreds of thousands of dollars in suitcases, White House assistants playing dirty tricks in an effort to help the President, and lofty administration silence about it all, that is their prerogative. If the administration is in a position to prove all of this is wrong and still chooses not to do so, that is its prerogative. And, if we can learn and verify more about this whole sordid mess, it is not simply our prerogative to print it—it is our job and our responsibility.