

Guilt by "Social and Cultural Affinity"

The other day Mr. Clark MacGregor, the head of the committee to re-elect President Nixon, delivered a vigorous critique of this newspaper, asserting that The Post's "credibility has today sunk lower than that of George McGovern." The night before last, Senator Robert Dole, who is Chairman of the Republican National Committee, unloosed an even more violent assault on our "credibility," saying it had sunk so low as to have "almost disappeared from the Big Board altogether." There seems to be a pattern developing here—in fact, Senator Dole said specifically that we can expect this "treatment" on a regular basis—and that being the case, considerations of space will unfortunately preclude us from continuing to give you the benefit of reading these diatribes in full text, as we did in the case of Mr. MacGregor. But we would like to offer a few samples of Senator Dole's work because he obviously has a particular flair for this sort of thing.

Speaking of our news coverage of the burglary of the Democratic Party headquarters and the secret Republican fund for political espionage and sabotage and related illegalities and improprieties in connection with the campaign to re-elect the President, Mr. Dole talks of a "vendetta" and a "massive diversion" and a "disreputable enterprise." He inquires as to our motives and has a ready answer: We have, he alleges, a "community of ideological interest" in Senator McGovern's radical policies—and never mind that we have supported them less often than the President's policies. We also have, he contends, a "cultural and social affinity" with the "McGovernites," whatever that means, and an "historic hostility" to Mr. Nixon—which would seem to ignore our affinity, which is to say, our support for his Chinese and Soviet initiatives; for his welfare program; for great chunks of his "New American Revolution"; and for some considerable part of his Vietnam War policy, especially in the earlier days.

In short, Senator Dole perceives an "unnatural relationship between the Senator and The Post," as evidenced by the fact that we have the same law firm as the Democratic Party; that our Business and Financial Editor's son married one of Senator McGovern's daughters five years ago; and that Mr. Frank Mankiewicz, the political director of the McGovern campaign, was once a Washington Post columnist and is, assertedly, "the fair-haired boy of its publisher."

Now this is all pretty strong stuff, coming, as it does, from people who would have you believe they have nothing to hide; and at a time when they are riding higher in the polls than anybody ever has at this stage of a presidential campaign; and in response to an alleged "rescue-and-salvage operation" on our part in behalf of Senator McGovern which Mr. Dole describes as a "spectacular failure."

And it is also pretty silly stuff, which is best demonstrated, perhaps, by calling Mr. Mankiewicz, our alleged "fair-haired boy," as a witness on just one matter raised by Mr. Dole.

The Senator, at one point, takes us to task for not reporting that Mr. Gus Hall, of the American Communist Party, had written in the Communist Daily World that Mr. McGovern's recent Vietnam speech was "a great step forward." To Senator Dole, this was evidence of our extreme—and presumably misplaced—sensitivity to "guilt by association" and of our also deep-down sympathy with Mr. McGovern's Vietnam views. Well, we apparently don't read the Communist Daily World as regularly as Senator Dole does, but neither, apparently, does he read our editorial page, because actually we took strong issue with Senator McGovern's Vietnam peace plan, arguing that "in the process of resolving one moral dilemma, Senator McGovern would raise yet another equally tormenting question of morality" by "crippling South Vietnam's ability to defend itself." When Mr. Mankiewicz was asked by Elizabeth Drew on television the other day how he would respond to this argument, he replied: "With contempt." At about the same time, in a debate on these pages with William Safire of the White House staff, he described us as a "citadel of conservative chic." Only a few weeks earlier, Mr. Mankiewicz had denounced the Washington and New York coverage of the McGovern campaign as unfair.

So much for our "fair-haired boy." And so much for Senator Dole's new doctrine of guilt by ideological, social and cultural "affinity." As we said the other day in connection with Mr. MacGregor, if the administration and its surrogates wish to respond to news stories about the Watergate burglary and related campaign practices by silence or blanket denials or artful evasions, on the one hand—and by trying to make an issue of this newspaper, on the other—that is their prerogative. But the effort should be seen for what it is—an attempt, not to respond to serious charges on their merits, but instead to discredit those who are reporting the charges. This business of trying to undermine credibility is an old and familiar practice and the only question you have to ask yourself is this: Why bother, if there is nothing to hide?

Why, for example, did the administration resist the idea of an independent investigation, while delaying court proceedings and rushing to shut off Congressional inquiries which might have shed a little more light on this affair before election day? That is the interesting question, hopefully to be answered sooner or later by the Congress or the courts. That will be the real test of our credibility—and that of Mr. Ronald Zeigler at the White House and of Clark MacGregor and of Senator Dole—and we welcome it.