

In the Absence Of Serious Men

By Russell Baker

OBSERVER

The admission by the President's man, H. R. Haldeman, that he was responsible for intelligence during the Nixon campaign of 1972 is gravely damaging, for intelligence was the one commodity in which the campaign was poverty-stricken.

It had millionaires in surplus and hard-hats in the side pocket, and as soon as President Nixon decided not to campaign he could have been declared the winner by forfeit, for in George McGovern the Democrats had contributed a candidate who could have beaten no one except the Mr. Hyde whom Richard Nixon becomes when he takes to the stump.

The President said afterwards it was all over the night the Democrats nominated McGovern. One wonders why he didn't tell Haldeman. Perhaps he thought a man responsible for campaign intelligence would not have to be notified of the obvious.

Whatever the case, the Nixon campaign without Nixon was permitted to proceed at peak output as though up against a Roosevelt or an Eisenhower. Maybe the President didn't have the heart to call it off. Everybody, after all, had been looking forward to a fight, and now if there was to be no fight there could at least be a picnic.

Intelligence failure was rampant. First off, somebody decided that the White House front organization for the campaign would be called the Committee to Re-elect the President. Where was the intelligence division at this point? Why didn't Haldeman say, "But if we call it that, somebody with an eye for a cheap acronym is going to call it CREEP"?

The spirit of Laurel and Hardy was stalking the landslide. Intelligence failed, and CREEP it became.

Enter Maurice Stans, the greatest squeezer of the rich since the estate tax. On behalf of CREEP, Stans amassed a pile of campaign swag big enough to re-elect the President for the rest of the twentieth century. This was typical of the pointlessness of things. The President was constitutionally blocked from running for the rest of the century and didn't need any money to win in 1972.

Whether the satchel full of cash, the Mexican moneylaundering operation, the Arab bazaar in ambassadorships—whether these seems to be symptoms of a new low in political rot or merely low comedy in slightly

bad taste will depend on the observer's political bias. Nobody, on the other hand, will disagree about their dumbness.

At the top there had been intelligence failure. Nobody had thought to send CREEP a note saying, "What's the point of embarrassing ourselves? We've got it won."

There was not even much thought given, apparently, to splitting the money with Republicans running for Congress. Another intelligence failure. When the landslide was over the Republicans had gained not a dime at the Capitol, and the President had lost a few friends in his own party because of CREEP's sitting on that superfluous hoard.

Everything was superfluous in the best Laurel and Hardy tradition. Stans' millions. The Mexican laundry. I.T.T.'s \$400,000, or \$100,000, depending upon which superfluous figure you choose to believe. CREEP itself was the ultimate in the superfluous, and so, naturally, remains in business to this day, although the President was re-elected five months ago, returning unwanted money and sending starchy letters to the editor.

The Watergate business, the well poisoning, the electronic eavesdropping, the gumshoe surveillance of important Democrats—it is too kind to dismiss all this as merely superfluous dumbness. It is all too strongly suggestive of overgrown boys playing at a fantasy of government, instead of men at work on the intractable complexities of the state's business.

Haldeman opens the question when he says he was responsible for intelligence. Intelligence? Why in the world does a political party require a big White House mucky-muck to play C.I.A. and KGB when any respectable newspaper reporter in Washington can spend three hours on the telephone and learn more about the Democratic party than even a Republican President wants to know?

This suggestion of men enacting boyish fantasies is worse than whatever crimes may have been committed in the heat of game playing. Serious men do not carry on the way these people have. It is disturbing to suspect that this huge, potentially demonic superstate in which we abide is not in the hands of serious men.