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Watergate: The Misuse Of Power...

In these days of scandals in high places, power is unjustly getting the bad name that should instead be applied to those who misunderstand and abuse power.

A somewhat similar confusion which imputed evil to alcohol itself rather than to those who mishandled it led long ago to the ghastly mistake of prohibition.

The danger now is that the public's shocked recoil from the Watergate affair may lead to public insistence on a capon-like White House and government which while capable of doing nothing bad would also be capable of doing nothing good.

However appalling is the mess that hangs over the Nixon administration and however obvious the need for a shakeup in the palace guard, no one should deduce from all this that what is required is a new "system" accompanied by a reduction in the authority of the presidency itself.

There is nothing wrong with the concept of a "strong" presidency; to the contrary it is an irreplaceable need and if we weaken the ability of that office to act we shall weaken us all. There is nothing wrong with the existing system of presidential assistants.

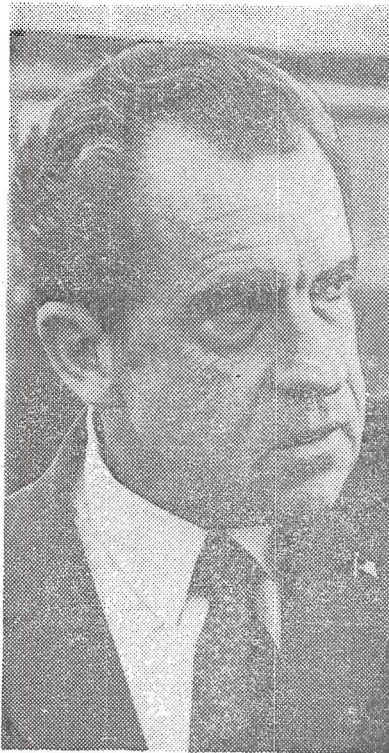
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There is nothing wrong with the organization of the White House establishment.

What is wrong is not with administrative structures but rather with some of the men in those structures.

Every President must face severe risks in choosing—and maintaining—his staff. Every staff in its turn faces—and part of it usually succumbs to occupational hazards of its own. The first and most common is the onset of a peculiar arrogance; the air is mighty heady and it takes a strong sense of perspective to function effectively in it.

Presidential assistants are prone to begin after a while to believe that the authority which they exercise only in the name of the President—and without which they would only be Joe



President Nixon

Blows—is in fact their own authority. And that is what had happened to some—not all—in the Nixon White House.

Given this presumption it is only a short step to an even more dangerous one. This is that aides know what the President wants at least as well and possibly better than he does and that they can and should do things for the administration that he ought, at least, want them to do.

Both Presidents Kennedy and Johnson were often embarrassed by some—but again not all—of their assistants. Yet this was not for what they did but only for what they said. President Nixon's assistants have *done* rather than said. Having watched the all too articulate palace guards of the Kennedy-Johnson era, where academics would on occasion proclaim their own personal foreign policy at cocktail parties, President Nixon clearly decided he wanted doers and not talkers—and that is what he got. The Haldemans, the Ehrlichmans and so on—"The Germans," or "The Berlin Wall," to White House reporters—talk little and write less. Instead, they are "can-do men" and it is they or like-minded "can-do men" who have got the administration into such trouble.

Mr. Nixon's "can-do men" are too aggressive, too self-proud and far too little experienced in politics except at the gadgetry advertising and image level. The ethics of the TV type of merchandizing are not the worst in the world; but neither are they the best. The ethics of professional politicians, however imperfect, are in fact far higher. And pros are remarkably thin on the ground in the Nixon White House, probably because the President thought—and wrongly as it turned out—that the politics he could handle himself.