

George Will

# Nixon, de Gaulle— And Louis Napoleon

The Nixon administration may soon resemble the "rather equivocal and shapeless pudding" that caused Churchill to command, "Pray, take away this pudding, it has no theme." Until recently the administration had a theme—the restoration of faith in the competence and dignity of our political system. Hence President Nixon's desire for a Gaullist presidency, as aloof, isolated, and "mysterious" as the mores of our handpumping, baby-kissing republic will permit. So he surrounded himself with a White House staff the size of which was, until recently, exceeded only by its delusions of adequacy. But the unfolding Watergate scandal—the unraveling Watergate cover-up—indicates that the moral turpitude of certain staff members has exceeded even their delusions.

Now as they turn on one another, scrambling to avoid going directly from the graceful federal period furniture of executive offices to the austerity of cots in federal prisons, they are doing unprecedented, unforgivable damage to the office and country they were supposed to serve. . . .

It is appropriate that both Mitchells are at the epicenter of the Watergate earthquake. Every administration needs a Casey Stengel, a madcap whose antic soliloquies make normal government speech seem, by contrast,

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straightforward. For four years Martha was Stengel, having fun and being funny. Last June 17 the fun stopped. She gave John an ultimatum: "Politics or me."

John Mitchell, like others involved in the Watergate investigation, must be presumed innocent of lawbreaking until proven guilty. But that does not make it any easier to believe anything he or the others say these days. The day after the break-in he issued a disingenuous and misleading statement about the relationship of one of the conspirators (James McCord) to the Committee for the Re-election of the President (CRP). He has spent the subsequent months claiming the break-in was a complete surprise to him. Perhaps it was. Perhaps Jeb Magruder, Mitchell's deputy at CRP, is not telling the truth when he says that while Mitchell was still the nation's chief law-enforcement officer, he met with Magruder, G. Gordon Liddy (subsequently convicted for participating in the break-in), and White House counsel John Dean to discuss plans to bug Watergate. Perhaps none of these people have been saying in public and private what the papers report they are saying.

But this much we know: The papers have been right from the start about this; and now that the principals have gone from dissembling to calling one another liars, we must wait for the courts to sort things out.

The conspirators—whoever they all turn out to be—came close to getting away with allowing the five hapless burglars to fall alone. But the judge who convicted the five decided they had not told the whole truth, and his pressure led McCord to talk. Judge Sirica probably would not have been so insistent had the Post not relentlessly insisted on the absurdity of the idea that CRP, although tightly controlled from the White House, had employees using hundreds of thousands of dollars to finance felonies without

the knowledge of anyone in the White House. The President asked the fox (Dean) to "investigate" the henhouse and the fox reported that nothing was amiss. So the country is reduced to hoping that the President has been the innocent victim of his own misjudgments about staff—that he has been

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lied to consistently by some of his closest associates.

One thing that should be emphasized is that Mitchell, Dean, and Magruder are not politicians. Prior to Watergate Mitchell's principal political achievements were managing the 1968 campaign (wherein defeat was nearly snatched from the jaws of victory) and setting the strident law-and-order theme for the GOP in the disappointing 1970 elections. Dean and Magruder are just young men upwardly mobile in the current Washington manner, clean-cut, affable, and unburdened with ideas. The Mitchells, Deans, and Magruder are doing on the GOP side what the professors, playwrights, and professional students did on the Democratic side in 1972: They are demonstrating that politics is too serious to be left to non-politicians. "Trust the politicians," Pat Moynihan once said, "they know what they know." They know you do not win elections by bugging offices, and that is the best reason for believing the President had nothing to do with planning Watergate.

Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler declared a fortnight ago that all previous denials of White House complicity in Watergate are "inoperative." The most interesting thing about that word is not that it is more accurate than Ziegler probably intended (it means "not working" or "without practical force") but that it exemplifies the mode of speaking necessary for the kind of thinking that numbs minds and encourages Watergates. To say blandly that bushels of false prior statements are now "inoperative" is to opt for self-serving fuzziness when only precise language (e.g., "We were wrong") will arrest the spreading belief that

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the administration is only interested in the truth because, and to the extent that, the truth is nipping at its heels. Perhaps the administration cannot read the writing on the crumbling wall: It is time to quit being so disastrously cute, and to start preserving the President's ability to govern.

Nixon, in the words of his embattled predecessor, is the only President we've got. No one can command, "Pray, take this administration away, it has no theme." But if the spreading stain of Watergate is not cleansed, the administration will have no authority—power, but no authority.

The President's attempt to be de Gaulle has collapsed. What is worrisome is that in a republic those who try to be de Gaulle come (as de Gaulle did in 1968) to resemble Louis Napoleon, "a sphinx without a riddle," all power and no authority—a pitiful, helpless giant.