



BY STEWART ALSOP

POOR MR. NIXON

WASHINGTON—Why does hardly anyone feel any sense of human sympathy or compassion for President Nixon in his sad situation?

Consider a simple contrast. President John Kennedy was personally and directly responsible for the Bay of Pigs operation. He approved it, ordered it and then limited it in such a way as to make its failure inevitable. The failure resulted in a tragic fiasco and a drastic drop in American world prestige. The result: the first post-Bay of Pigs Gallup Poll gave Kennedy a record-breaking 83 per cent approval rating.

The Watergate affair has been more than a tragic fiasco. In September, it was described in this space as "just about the scariest and nastiest thing that has happened in Washington since Joe McCarthy was in his heyday," and there has been no reason to revise that judgment. But there is also a difference. There is no evidence that President Nixon was personally and directly responsible for the operation. If ever such evidence is produced, the President will no doubt be impeached. But it is logical to suppose he knew nothing about it.

For one thing, Mr. Nixon is too professional a politician to approve an operation at once so dangerous and so unrewarding. Moreover, at the time, he had plenty of things other than bugging Larry O'Brien's office to think about, including the North Vietnamese attack on South Vietnam, and his own subsequent decision to blockade Haiphong. And it is also logical to suppose that the men who were involved in this bit of smelly smart aleckry were eager to conceal their involvement from the boss.

FACE VALUE

Assume, then, that the President had no prior knowledge of the Watergate asininity, and assume also that he simply took at face value the report of counsel John Dean that none of his major subordinates was involved. If these assumptions are correct, doesn't the President deserve just a smidgeon, at least, of sympathy?

For consider what the men who were responsible for the Watergate and the other exercises in political espionage, sabotage and money manipulation have done to the President. Only a few months ago he scored one of the great landslides in history. He has successfully achieved a great, his-

toric turnabout in the relations between the United States and the two chief Communist powers. He has been the architect of an honorable extrication of the United States from the Vietnam quagmire. At home, he is presiding over a great economic boom. True, the boom is accompanied by the distant danger of a bust. But most Americans are nevertheless living higher on the hog than most Americans have ever lived before, and that is what matters most to most Americans.

AMATEUR JAMES BONDS

In short, if it were not for Watergate, President Nixon would be facing his remaining years in the Presidency with confidence and the respect of the citizenry. Instead, according to a recent poll, almost half the citizenry suspect him of being personally involved in an act of illegality that would certainly justify his impeachment. His reputation and the prestige of the office of the Presidency are both in danger of being smashed. And all this because a bunch of amateur James Bonds, with too much money to spend, indulged themselves in the most idiotic exercise in political dirty work in modern American political history. Poor Mr. Nixon.

Yet most people, to judge from the polls and other evidence, feel no sympathy whatever for poor Mr. Nixon. On the contrary, the populace as a whole seems to be taking a positive pleasure out of his downfall, the same kind of pleasure a small boy feels when he sees the pompous banker slip on a banana peel. This unsympathetic reaction is a politically interesting phenomenon.

One reason, of course, is that although he may have known nothing at all about Watergate, Mr. Nixon certainly helped to bring his present troubles on himself. The people who got him into trouble are his people, or were hired by his people. Among them all, there is not a single professional politician—plenty of lawyers, ad men, and the like, but not a man who's run for dogcatcher. The men with practical political experience—like Mel Laird, or Robert Finch, or Clark MacGregor—were either never admitted to the White House inner circle, or quickly squeezed out of it.

One result was inevitable. There is always a certain cat-and-dog relationship between elected and appointed officials, like that between combat soldiers and neatly tailored staff men in

wartime. But the bitterness of the Capitol Hill Republicans toward "the White House Crowd" is something special.

When they were riding high, a good many of the White House men behaved toward the Congressional Republicans like "jumped-up muck," to borrow a phrase from Churchill. As a result, in the President's time of trouble, there is not a single Republican on Capitol Hill who will come to the defense of "the White House Crowd." And some at least of the members of that crowd are behaving in accordance with the sinister little adage in George Orwell's novel, "1984":

*Under the spreading chestnut tree,
I sold you and you sold me.*

The final reason for the almost total lack of sympathy for the beleaguered President is buried in the mysteries of the human personality. Mr. Nixon is a hard, tough, lonely man, whose motto might be *noli me tangere*—do not touch me. Such men are not the kind that naturally elicit sympathy and compassion.

This is a great, unalterable weakness, as the President prepares to deal with his super-crisis. For a great deal, including his authority as President, will depend on the way people react to the television report that the President must sooner or later make to the American people.

In that report, the President must avoid all mawkishness and malice—qualities he has not always avoided in the past. He must convince the people that he really played no part in the squalid Watergate business. He must also convince them that he is now master in his own house, which he clearly was not when Watergate and its related shenanigans were permitted to happen.

This requires a major housecleaning, with a new staff for the White House and a new way of doing business there. Finally, he must convince the people that he intends to end the corruption effect of big money on big politics, and that means new legislation to subsidize national campaigns, which the President has always opposed heretofore.

There is simply no way for Mr. Nixon to wipe out Watergate and its evil aftermath, or to gain the sympathy of people who feel no sympathy for him. But there remains at least a chance that he can restore to his office the basic authority that the American system requires in order to operate, not necessarily well, but at all.