

The Benefit of Doubt

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By James L. Buckley

WASHINGTON—A recent Gallup Poll shows that 50 per cent of the 456 people polled think that President Nixon has been covering up facts in the Watergate case. Yet 58 per cent say they see little difference with respect to corruption between the Nixon Administration and others over the last 25 years.

Have we reached a point in our national life when the traditional, healthy skepticism of the American electorate has turned into a morbid cynicism? I hope and pray it is not so. But if it is, perhaps part of the blame can be found in the kind of world view typified by the Herblock cartoon which appeared two mornings after the President's speech showing a guilty looking Mr. Nixon trying to cover up a closet full of scandal.

It appears that the vultures are circling—hoping against hope to find the corpse of the Presidency. It is the Presidency that is at stake just as much as the credibility of Richard Nixon in this torrent of speculation and innuendo that is trying to impute the President's complicity in the conspiracy to suppress full disclosure of the truth about Watergate. I do not here refer to what is known as hard news—which has on the whole been quite responsible—but to commentary of various sorts.

President Nixon was elected last November by a landslide. He is the President of all Americans. He represents the Presidency as an institution. He is entitled to the benefit of every doubt not only as a matter of law, not only as a matter of elemental fairness, but as a matter of deep national self-interest.

I have seen or read nothing to date that causes me to question the full truth of the President's statement as to the exact extent of his knowledge of the Watergate affair. In 1972 I was proud to be among the tens of millions of American who, overwhelmingly,

backed President Richard Nixon's bid for re-election. Nothing that has occurred since that time has in any way made me wish I had taken another course.

I have had my disagreements with this Administration. I have at times openly criticized some of its policies and expect to do so in the future. I was among the first Republicans to publicly call upon the President to speak directly to the American people about the Watergate affair. But I want to emphasize, and state publicly, that I believe taken as a whole, his accomplishments have been admirable, and will win him an honored place in history.

I disagree with those who state that the Watergate affair will be the determining factor in history's judgment of Richard Nixon. Instead, I believe history and the American people will judge Mr. Nixon on his record as President, and I believe that record promises much for the next three and a half years if his effectiveness is not destroyed by the kind of comment to which I have alluded.

Ordinarily it would be presumptuous of a United States Senator to feel compelled to publicly proclaim confidence in the President of the United States. But these are extraordinary times. Richard Nixon, both as a man and as a President, needs no defense from me or from anybody else. But at a time when many are willing to attempt to drag him down with those who are implicated in the Watergate affair, I think it is necessary in all conscience to state, as I have, that I am as proud today as I was in 1972 of supporting him for re-election.

A healthy skepticism has always been a hallmark of the American political tradition. But when that skepticism becomes transformed into cynicism the political order itself is hurt. I urge all Americans to give the President the support he needs and deserves in this troubled time.

James L. Buckley, a Republican, is the junior Senator from New York.