

William S. White

Counterattacking On Watergate . . .

Behind the most massive wall of security ever experienced by this columnist since the last unforgotten weeks in England just before the D-Day invasion, President Nixon is preparing a major counterattack in the Watergate scandal.

In that May of 1944 staff officers of the United States and Britain were at work day and night in a hyper-secret headquarters in London called Cossack. Cossack was laying out Operation Overlord, the code name for the coming cross-channel assault upon Nazi-occupied France.

Those of us who were accredited to go across on D-Day knew what Cossack was and where Cossack met—but that was all we knew.

Today's Washington Cossack is a handful of men—six at most, is my guess—who meet at all hours in the White House-Executive Office Building complex. As was the case with the old Cossack, the secrecy maintained is impenetrable in the most absolute sense.

Excluded is certainly the bulk of the Cabinet itself; and perhaps the whole

of the Cabinet. Indeed, as was the case three decades ago in England, it is not even known exactly who is in Cossack though a man can draw some perhaps iffy inferences simply by noting who it is these days who is no longer available by telephone or otherwise.

Facing a test no less somber and fateful in political terms than was Overlord in military terms, the President confronts something else, too. As it was not enough in London to know that So and So wore the insignia of the armed forces of the United States or Britain, it is not enough now to know that So and So is a high official of the Nixon administration. Just as the first Cossack was kept deliberately in small numbers in order to reduce the risk of inept or malign leaks, so today's Cossack is consciously kept thin in bodies—and portentous in its utter silence.

For if anything at all is clear about Watergate it is that the President (assuming as I do that he was not involved in any wrongful way) has already been let down by men he had every reason to trust and no reason whatever to fear.

So much for the shape and aura of today's Cossack. What sort of counter-

attack, then, may it be assumed to be planning? The only approach presently possible is that of speculation. This writer's speculation is that the core of the administration's case will be a justification based upon some peril to national security which it was believed at least had been found and which transcended any and all ordinary issues of the presidential campaign itself.

Those famously enigmatic FBI files referring to mysterious matters far antedating the bugging of the Watergate—files not available for the Pentagon Papers trial but then suddenly turned up in a White House safe—should be kept well in mind here. Kept well in mind, too, should be the fact that while the resigned White House assistants John Ehrlichman and H. R. Haldeman continue to be publicly the chief villains of the piece, both also continue to bear the President's undiminished accolade for integrity in public service.

If Mr. Nixon had nothing which he believed later would support his estimate of these two men is it reasonable to suppose that he would go—and stay—so far out on a limb for them?

And is it credible to suppose that amid all this flood of accusation, the administration has maintained its long silence solely because it has nothing to say in rebuttal? Or is it not more believable that this silence is not so much for want of something to say as for a desire to copper-plate the case the administration will in time bring forth?