

Former Attorney General John N. Mitchell has joined the growing ranks of those who insist that they are being made the scapegoats for other people's wrongdoing in the Watergate scandal. Reaffirming his "clear conscience," Mr. Mitchell said: "I've never stolen any money. The only thing I did was to try to get the President re-elected. I never did anything mentally or morally wrong."

This brief statement constitutes a compendium of the creeping amorality that—more than any criminal act—paved the road to the Nixon Administration's present shame. Mr. Mitchell, of course, remains innocent of any crime unless and until proved guilty in court. But there is no need to suspend judgment as to the morality of his conduct. By his own earlier admission, for example, Mr. Mitchell had attended meetings within the Committee for the Re-Election of the President at which plans for political espionage were discussed. Yet, in the aftermath of the Watergate break-in he did not consider it his duty, either as a law-abiding citizen or as the nation's former chief legal officer, to come forward to volunteer that testimony.

Nor can there be doubt that Mr. Mitchell allowed the powers of the Justice Department to be placed at the disposal of the re-election committee, even before he stepped down as Attorney General and assumed the committee's chairmanship in name as well as in fact. It may well be futile to debate issues of morality with men who see nothing "morally wrong" in such a conflict of interests.

Mr. Mitchell's protestation that he has "never stolen any money" would be merely pathetic, if it were not so close to the heart of this Administration's dangerous misconception about the meaning of "law and order." Stealing money is seen by the White House inner circle as essentially a poor man's crime, to be combatted with harsh penalties by hard-nosed judges. But no such rigorous standards of "law and order" apply to the abuses of governmental power, the granting of special favors to those who contribute to the President's re-election, or the unconstitutional use of the Government's eavesdropping apparatus.

Clearly in Mr. Mitchell's mind—as in the minds of others in the President's palace guard—there existed one set of laws for the common people and another for themselves as the governing élite. The hot cash in the committee's safes and briefcases, after all, was not stolen money, and those who used it unscrupulously considered their cause sufficient justification of their questionable actions. As Mr. Mitchell phrased it, the only thing he did was "to try to get the President re-elected." And so, the former Attorney General rests his moral case and his conscience.