



BY STEWART ALSOP

THE CASE FOR NIXON

WASHINGTON—Is it not about time for someone to stick his neck out and try to make the case for Richard Nixon? This is such an attempt. It is largely based on conversations with the dwindling band of loyalists, in and out of the White House, who are still willing to defend the beleaguered President.

The case against the President has been made hard and often in this space. It boils down to the charge that the President and the men around him have not been practicing politics in the traditional American manner. Instead, they have been making war—a special, dirty, covert kind of war, in which the political opposition was treated, not as an opposition, but as an enemy.

The response of the Nixon loyalists is that they did not start this war; that the opposition was the first to treat the Nixon Administration as the enemy. They cite the following examples:

First, it became clear as early as 1969 that the left-wing opposition had infiltrated the secret vitals of the Nixon Administration. The leaks to the press which began then showed that the purpose of this infiltration was political and ideological—i.e., to undermine, and if possible to wreck, the Nixon foreign policy.

LEAKS AND TAPS

One example was the 1969 leak of the project for bombing the major North Vietnamese base areas in Cambodia, with the secret concurrence of Prince Sihanouk, then ruler of Cambodia. The purpose of the leak seemed obvious—to wreck the project, and force Sihanouk into the arms of the Communists. Other leaks, on Israel, North Vietnamese negotiations, Korea, and especially the secret U.S. position papers on the SALT talks with the Russians, seemed equally clearly designed to undermine the Nixon foreign policy.

In this situation, President Nixon and Henry Kissinger turned to the professionals of the FBI for help. Taps—legally at the time, and by no means for the first time in recent history—were put on the telephones of the principal suspects.

This has been described by one commentator as the “passive acceptance of dirty tricks” by Dr. Kissinger. In fact, the protection of vital government secrets is the legal responsibility of the NSC secretary, and it has been so regarded by all Kissinger’s predecessors, right back to Harry Truman’s Kissinger,

Adm. Sidney Souers, who twice ordered FBI investigations of a pair of youthful journalists named Alsop.

Evidence that the opposition was prepared to treat the Nixon Administration as the enemy, and to use any and all means to bring it down, was not confined to the NSC leaks. The Nixon loyalists cite much further evidence. There was, for example, the report to the President by J. Edgar Hoover that a group of conspirators were plotting to kidnap Kissinger and to blow up major government installations. This is not the sort of thing that any head of government can dismiss with a merry laugh.

PROFESSIONALS AND PRAGMATISTS

Or there was the march on Washington in May 1971. The declared purpose of the march was to “bring the government of the United States to a halt,” and that purpose, and much violence, was very nearly achieved. That is not the sort of thing that a head of government can laugh off either.

Instead, the President unwisely decided to fight fire with fire, and unwisely put John Ehrlichman in charge of the fire-fighting. Enter here G. Gordon Liddy and E. Howard Hunt, a pair of professional secret-service types hired as covert fire fighters by Ehrlichman. There followed, in due course, the idiocy of the Watergate break-in. That idiocy can only be explained in terms of the idiocy of the Bay of Pigs.

At the time of the Bay of Pigs, a group of sophisticated, pragmatic, able men had just taken over the government—McGeorge Bundy, Robert McNamara, Dean Rusk, John and Robert Kennedy. These men were somehow hypnotized into believing that Fidel Castro and his million-man army could be toppled by putting a couple of thousand Cuban refugees ashore in Cuba.

How could such men have come to believe that such an inherently unbelievable scheme might succeed? The answer lies somewhere in the mystique of the secret-service professional *vis-à-vis* the amateur. Somehow, in such a confrontation, the amateur tends to put a childish faith in the confident assertions of the professional.

Liddy and Hunt had already made what the British call “a fair muck” of their attempt to steal the papers of Ellsberg’s psychiatrist. But somehow the secret service mystique clung to them. Somehow (“Now don’t worry about a thing—we have the whole situa-

tion taped”) they were able to persuade the President’s principal subordinates to give a green light to the Watergate operation—a scheme, mind you, no more inherently idiotic than the Bay of Pigs operation.

On June 17, the Watergate operation blew up in the faces of the President’s men, just as the Bay of Pigs had blown up a decade earlier. Only this time, the President was not involved. This time, the first instinct of those who *were* involved was to keep the President ignorant of their roles. In some of their minds, this was no doubt rationalized on the ground of “not worrying the President.” Keeping the President ignorant meant keeping the press and the people ignorant, and this in turn meant resorting to all sorts of artful dodges, including the attempt to use the CIA as cover.

SHENANIGANS AND SHOCK

As for the President, he turned to John Ehrlichman, himself deeply involved, and asked him to find out whether any White House people were involved in the Watergate scandal. Ehrlichman duly reported to him that it was strictly a low-level affair, and the President, being human, sighed a sigh of relief and inquired no further. Thus the revelations in March, which left no doubt that most of his most trusted subordinates were indeed involved up to their armpits in this and many other shenanigans, came as a genuine shock to the President.

That, in brief, is the case for Mr. Nixon made by the remaining Nixon loyalists. How good a case is it?

The answer will depend in part on the political predilections of the answerer. This writer could rather easily write another column knocking big holes in the case. And yet, even to those who are convinced that Mr. Nixon is a bad man through and through, there must be some answer more satisfactory than the simple badness of the man to the question: How could a professional politician as experienced and as intelligent as Richard Nixon have risked his own ruin for such small ends?

Ultimately, it may not matter very much whether the case for Mr. Nixon is a good case or a bad case. What will matter is whether the President retains the credibility and authority necessary to govern. That remains much in doubt, the more so since the Sam Ervin Show opened on Capitol Hill.