Richard Holbrooke

Reading Between the President's Lines

In defense of himself, Mr. Nixon has provided us with one of the most remarkable documents of his remarkable career. With his back against the wall, stripped of the protective layers of staff, fighting for his political life, he has given us in his May 22 statement an extraordinary insight into the way he views the world.

Never mind for a moment if he is finally telling the whole truth, or even

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a good part of it. The courts and the Senate will decide that in the coming weeks, with help from investigative reporters. Consider, rather, the world the President lives in, and ask yourself if it bears any resemblance to yours:

1969: The world we live in, he believes, is threatened by a subversive conspiracy at every level. In the words of columnist Stewart Alsop, summarizing the views of the inner Nixon team, the administration believed that "the left-wing opposition had infiltrated the secret vitals of the Nixon foreign policy."

1970: Then a sudden threat "of critical proportions": a wave of violence sweeping across the nation, with "some of the disruptive activities receiving foreign support."

1971: a theft of 47 volumes of studies and documents "from the most sensitive files," a "security leak of unprecedented proportions," creating *"a threat so grave as to require extraordinary actions."*

And so—viewing the world outside the oval office as hostile, the President took internal security measures. But because he could not even trust the established agencies any more—particularly the FBI, where old anti-subversive hero J. Edgar Hoover was no longer cooperative—he created an extraordinary little organization, which he himself refers to as "the plumbers."

Nothing is more astounding than the creation and existence of this group. It had no legal or legislative basis for existence; its very existence was a well-kept secret. It operated under the close supervision of John Ehrlichman, who presumably knew what the President wanted. It strikes me that this group, the Special Investigations Unit, may be the closest thing our nation has ever had to a secret, personal police. In the name of the President (and whether or not he authorized its specific acts) this group conducted illegal and criminal actions. The President personally selected the unit's "first priority"—Daniel Ellsberg. In a mood which must have been fierce and was certainly based on a misreading of the potential importance of Ellsberg, the President now recalls:

> *Because of the extreme gravity of the situation, and not then knowing what additional national secrets Mr. Ellsberg might disclose, I did impress upon Mr. Krogh the vital importance to the national security of his assignment.*

The President says he never authorized or knew of any of the "illegal means" then "used to achieve this goal," and perhaps he did not, but he had declared a secret war on his enemies, and then set loose his personal troops with a ringing order to win the day. As he himself now admits, those actions were his responsibility.

His distrust of the regular government, including even parts of the White House and Henry Kissinger's National Security Council, must be beyond all previously understood levels. Why else, for example, charge "the plumbers" with "compiling an accurate record of events related to the Vietnam war, on which the government's records were inadequate (many previous records having been removed with the change of administrations) and which bore directly on the negotiations then in progress." There was a qualified NSC staff under Kissinger working on this problem; there was State, Defense, the CIA; and, ironically enough, there was a voluminous study of just these questions, with information of great potential embarrassment not to Nixon but Lyndon Johnson and the Kennedys. That study, of course, was the Pentagon Papers.

Much more will undoubtedly become known about the extraordinary, extralegal activities of this extraordinary group, although we may never know its full scope. The President is still trying to preserve secrecy concerning its activities under his very last line of defense, national security. But unfortunately for the President's case, it was members of this same group who committed the break-in at the Watergate.

Conspiracy, subversive, Communist—those words of the 1940s and 1950s are missing from the President's May 22 statement. But they cry out from between the lines, echoing an era that we thought—and the President had even said—was ended. Richard Nixon, a veteran of those days, apparently thought he had some reason to know better.

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