

The Classic Nixon Assistant

Jeb Stuart Magruder

By CHRISTOPHER LYDON
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WASHINGTON, June 14—Up the escalator and down, Jeb Stuart Magruder has seemed the classic young Nixon assistant.

A California marketing man with a tennis-court tan, he is aggressive but likable and the father of four handsome children. He managed the details of President Nixon's landslide campaign and looked destined, before his 38th birthday (last Nov. 5), for a big-league political career of his own.

His downfall was swift. Last April he muttered, "My whole life is over, I'm ruined," before giving his Watergate confession to Federal prosecutors. "The walls were coming in on him," a friend said. One Justice Department official felt that he was the likeliest of the many defendants to crack under the strain, and many people in Washington cast him for a specially tragic role in the dark Watergate drama.

Mr. Magruder was a visibly nervous witness before inquiring Senators and television cameras in the Watergate hearings today. Yet friends say that for the last several weeks he has seemed once again the boyish getter, repentant but insistently upbeat about himself, prepared to go to prison but immersed, meanwhile, in new business ventures and still spouting management jargon even about the most personal aspects of his life.

'Learning Curve Method'

In conversation the other day he spoke clinically of suicide as "a process" and as "one solution to a problem"—but one that he never considered himself. Of the whole Watergate experience he said, "I wouldn't recommend it as a learning-curve method, but I guess I do think of it that way."

His humor has survived the ordeal. "Time magazine wrote that this is the end of my political career; now I'd say that's probably an astute comment," Mr. Magruder concurred, laughing heartily. He also reflects that though his face and name are momentarily infamous, "nine out of ten Americans couldn't remember Bobby Baker today."

Robert G. Baker, the one-time secretary to Senate Democrats, went to jail in a scandal of the mid-nineteen sixties.

From Mr. Magruder's closest friends have come indications of moral reflection on his part. The Rev. C. Blaney Colmore, an Episcopal minister who spent hours "commiserating" with Mr. Magruder last winter and spring, said in an interview yesterday that Mr. Magruder was "very relieved" when he admitted guilt two months ago.

"I'll tell you the honest-to-God truth," Mr. Colmore said, "I had the feeling from the first moment that he was dying to get caught. He was just miserable. Like so many guys in this Administration, Jeb's a pragmatist. But he was unhappy, and that to me is an indication of how much he wanted to

believe in his own integrity, how he feared it was coming unglued."

Blames Only Himself

Julian Gillespie, a stockbroker and neighbor of Mr. Magruder's in the comfortable Washington suburb of Sumner, Md., admires particularly the fact that "Jeb hasn't blamed anybody but himself." His mistake, Mr. Gillespie said, was "the exercise of bad judgment"—something worse than a bad marketing decision but short of "moral failure."

It was an "agonizing period," Mr. Gillespie said, but not one to scar Mr. Magruder profoundly. "I doubt an outsider would detect the change," Mr. Gillespie said. "It hasn't hurt him so bad that he doesn't beat the hell out of me playing tennis—and I used to beat him. Maybe he's more intent on the ball now."

Mr. Magruder's conversation does not dwell on guilt or excuses. He said earlier this week:

"I've made peace with myself on grounds—it's corny, but we've all sinned, right? There's more rejoicing over the one lost sheep that is found, etcetera. I think I'll be able to survive and be better for it. I think I've been as down as I've ever been down, but I've never been the kind that stays down."

There was more than a little pragmatism in his decision to confess, Mr. Magruder has acknowledged. To have fought the prosecution and appealed a conviction might have taken two years and \$200,000—money he does not have. "So you go the other way," he said in explanation of his agreement to plead guilty to one felony count. "You cooperate, and get the decision over with and then you move ahead."

Income Still Coming In

It is a point of satisfaction, he has said, that of all the famous Watergate conspirators, he is the only one who is working, who has a business and income coming in. Lawyers are more vulnerable to scandal than businessmen, he grants, and his own recovery may yet be interrupted by a jail sentence.

Still, he hopes to move eventually from his one-man marketing consulting company, called Metropolitan Research, Inc., to a management job in a big company. And even after Watergate, he believes that his experience in the Nixon campaign will someday count in his favor.

"In spite of what's been said about poor old C.R.E.P.," he said recently, pronouncing it "Creep," as Democrats did when they referred to the Committee for the Re-election of the President, "we did a hell of a good job. We got the message to our people, and we got them out to vote. The substantive work we did in that campaign—the work with computers, telephones and direct mail—will be used as a model in the future."

A certain cocky glibness has always marked the smooth, friendly, somehow unpretentious Magruder style.

The scion of an old Maryland family, he grew up on Staten Island in New York where his father owned a

modestly successful print shop. At Williams College (in the class of 1958) he focused on political science and, as he told the Senate committee this morning, studied ethics with the Rev. William Sloan Coffin Jr., now the chaplain at Yale.

But even as an undergraduate he was intensely interested in sales, a classmate recalls. He spent one college summer promoting Vicks cough medicines and also sold cosmetics to help pay his way.

In 1959 he married the former Gail Nicholas, a Vassar graduate, and became a father in 1961. He received a business degree at the University of Chicago in 1963 and entered a marketing career with the Jewel Tea Company and later with Broadway-Hale Stores, Inc., of Los Angeles.

Headed Two Companies

By the fall of 1969, when he joined the White House staff, he was the president of two small, apparently promising cosmetic companies in Santa Monica. But his interest in politics, whetted by staff work in a variety of mostly conservative Republican campaigns, had replaced his business ambitions.

At the White House, where he was a deputy to Herbert G. Klein, the Director of Communications, and later at the re-election committee, Mr. Magruder was clearly marked as a protégé of H. R. Haldeman, the Nixon chief of staff whom he had assisted in the campaign of 1968.

Colleagues recall Mr. Magruder as an apt, competitive, unoriginal practitioner of staff politics. Another former White House aide remembers his dropping the names of his superiors to heighten his own influence saying "Hi [for Haldeman] wants such and such," or "The general [for former Attorney General Mitchell] told me to tell you so and so."

He was always regarded as a follower, not a self-starter. Mr. Magruder seemed to confirm some of that this morning when he said that he had tentatively volunteered to "take the heat" for the Watergate break-in, but that others had decided, in effect, that no one would believe Magruder was powerful enough to order the raid officially or eccentric enough to order it unofficially.

The agreed-on cover-up story, for which Mr. Magruder perjured himself in the first Watergate trial, was that G. Gordon Liddy had planned the bugging on his own.

"Perhaps that was the key," said Mr. Magruder's tennis rival, Julian Gillespie, yesterday, "simply that he got associated in that campaign with a lot of able, aggressive people and a situation in which each one was trying to outdo the other's zeal."

In that atmosphere, which Mr. Magruder helped to discredit further today, he was an eager competitor. Until he saw the cover-up story unraveling late last winter, he said this morning, it never occurred to him to tell the truth.

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Mr. and Mrs. Jeb Stuart Magruder leaving the Senate hearing on Watergate yesterday