

George Will

Watergate and Conservatism

Recently I was invited to a university to participate in a panel discussion of Watergate. The man inviting me said the rest of the panel would be "liberal" and that the university wanted me to represent the "conservative position." What, I wondered, is the "conservative" position on burglary?

This small episode suggests an enormous hazard confronting conservatives today—a hazard familiar to liberals as well.

Reflective conservatives know they must act with special severity against miscreants whose political activities represent a perversion of conservatism in the name of—but contrary to—the essential conservative values. Reflective liberals also know they must sanitize their own ranks. But at crucial moments in recent history liberals and

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conservatives have failed to do this, thereby diminishing their credibility.

In the 1930s many liberals flunked the test posed by communism, at home and abroad. Seduced by the Stalinists' ability to play upon liberal passions for equality and reform, liberals were "understanding" about the "excesses" of totalitarianism on the left. Similarly, in the 1960s liberals were "understanding" about civil disorder when they should have been indignant.

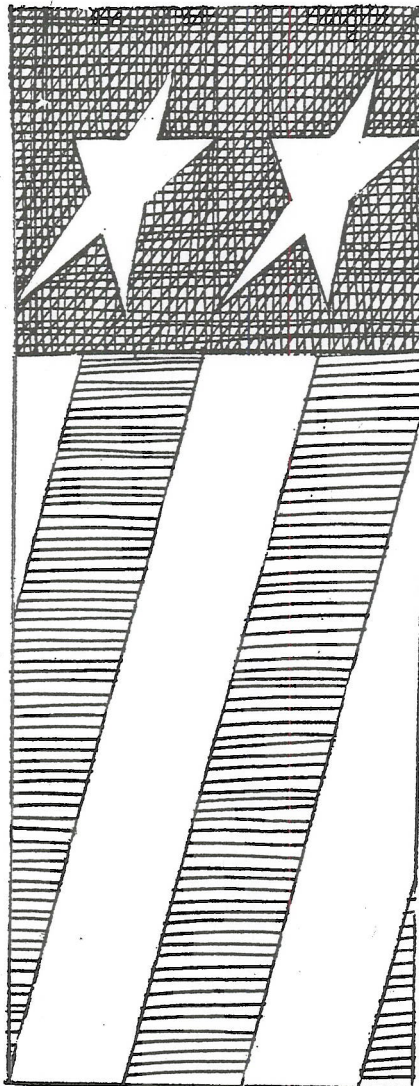
Like Stalinists in the 1930s, the "kids" attacking the universities in the name of "peace" and black "militants" destroying black neighborhoods to punish "white racism" won a kind of flaccid approval from many liberals. Bemused by rhetoric exploiting liberal impulses, liberals tolerated the intolerable.

Conservatives have had a similar failure. In the late 1940s and early 1950s many conservatives failed the test of Joe McCarthy. Because they quite properly detested communism and those who did not detest it, conservatives were "understanding" about McCarthy's cynical, frivolous and cruel rampages. Conservatives could have quarantined McCarthy's lumpen-conservatism; he was their responsibility. But many conservatives tolerated the intolerable. That is one reason why anti-communism, which should be a categorical imperative for every friend of freedom, instead today is widely considered faintly disreputable.

Now the misdeeds of the Nixon administration are similarly testing conservative judgment and integrity. In several senses, Mr. Nixon is the conservatives' "responsibility." They rescued him from political oblivion; they gave him the benefit of what seem to have been quite warranted doubts; they superintended his nomination in 1968. Moreover, the misdeeds of the administration strike at what conservatives cherish most: the institutions and procedures that guarantee limited government and prevent ordered liberty from degenerating into the licentious abuse of unchecked power.

If conservatives are going to remain useful as keepers of the public con-

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By David Gunderson

science about such things, they must now do several things.

First, they must eschew the "so's your old man" argument, the doctrine that "everybody does" the sort of things the Nixon administration has done. They especially must reject the morally-obtuse comparison between Watergate and Teapot Dome or Credit Mobilier. Conservatives should be well equipped and eager to argue that crimes of personal venality are less odious than crimes against the structure of liberty and justice—crimes such as perjury, destroying evidence, attempting to suborn witnesses or influence judges, misusing vulnerable institutions such as the FBI and CIA, sabotaging the process of democratic choice.

Second, conservatives must strenuously reject any insinuation that legitimate national security concerns motivated the criminal deeds of this administration. Just as McCarthy helped make the noble cause of anti-communism seem contemptible, the Nixon administration is well on its way to mak-

ing concern about national security seem ludicrous. (It has already done severe damage to the valuable doctrine of executive privilege.) Conservatives rightly object to liberal complacency about the profusion of Soviet SS-9 missiles. Conservatives should also object to the notion that in some arcane way the contents of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatric file are, like SS-9 missiles, important to national security.

Third, conservatives should lead a chorus of ridicule against the "Haldeman equation" in its many mutations. It is pernicious twaddle to equate loyalty to the Nixon administration with loyalty to the federal government, to government in general, to the Republican Party or to the nation. Already the Nixon administration's misdeeds have reinvigorated the zany left and reinforced all its worst misconceptions about the American "police state." Thanks to the Nixon administration conservatives especially have a sickening feeling of *deja vu*.

During the 1960s, conservatives labored at refuting preposterous doctrines about the emerging police state, the depredations of the FBI and the CIA, the manipulation of the masses by malefactors of great wealth, and so forth. Now Watergate, with the help of the "Haldeman equation" is being used to give retroactive legitimacy to the leftist paranoia about "Amerika."

Already the anti-American Americans are shelving their macrobiotic fads and hitting the lecture circuit to become politically trendy again. So conservatives must be about the tiresome business of reminding people that the particular actions of the Nixon administration (like those of the Johnson administration) do not vindicate the modish disparagement of the nation. In fact, the Nixon administration has inadvertently offered conservatives the bittersweet pleasure of demonstrating the truth of some venerable conservative doctrines about the perils of power and the folly of concentrating Washington power in the White House.

The final thing conservatives should do about Watergate is insist that most institutional aberrations have intellectual pedigrees, and the dizzy misadventures of the Nixon administration are not exceptions to that rule. Mr. Nixon's White House was able to run amuck because some foolish ideas already had done their work. In fact, the culprits are the two central ideas of recent American liberalism. One is that the average American is an incompetent dolt. (See "The Affluent Society," wherein J. Kenneth Galbraith "describes" Madison Avenue's manipulation of the gullible masses. Not even the White House branch of the Los Angeles branch of the J. Walter Thompson agency ever placed more faith in the power of advertising.) The other follows from the first: A strong federal government, with a strong President dominating a fractious Congress, must shepherd the masses through life.

These imperatives comprise an ambitious program of public pedagogy for conservatism. But if conservatives do not talk straight now, no one will listen when next they discourse on the subject of limited government in a lawful society.