

The Fearless Spectator

Charles McCabe

He Never Stole a Dime

"THEY TOOK crime off the streets—and brought it into the White House." So ran one of the acrid jokes when the mass knavery of Watergate began to surface. It really isn't all that funny anymore. It's just too bloody true.

And yet with all the scary revelations of lying, thieving, shredding and bugging, the dominant note of the top administration continues to be and to reflect what Mr. Nixon's friend, columnist William Buckley, calls the President's "curdling sanctimony." The rascals continue to listen to a different drummer. They were all working for a higher morality, as it turns out. That higher morality was the election of Mr. Nixon, without which this country would have surely expired.



The White House liar, Mr. Ron Ziegler, can dismiss all his earlier lies about Watergate with the single word "inoperative" and nobody particularly blinks an eye. In fact, the President promotes the White House liar to be Chief of Communications.

I should hope, but it is a hope against hope, that the epigraph of the Watergate affair, whenever it passes into history, will be the words of one of its chief engineers, former attorney General John N. Mitchell. It is one of the curious marks of this affair that while a burglary was planned in the office of Mr. Mitchell while Attorney General, according to sworn testimony, there are still people who are asking, "What's all the fuss about Watergate?"

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EARLY IN MAY, Mr. Mitchell was carrying on about his "clear conscience." He then said, in a statement which wraps the whole Watergate thing in a nutshell: "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."

There is no doubt that Mr. Mitchell believed every word of that astonishing declaration. He is not lacking in curdling sanctimony himself. Nor does he lack that distinguishing characteristic of the sociopath, the inability to distinguish between right and wrong. The sociopath is the guy who can take any lie detector test on the market, and take it 150 times, and never flunk once. The lie detector test measures guilt. The sociopath feels none.

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THE OTHER DAY the Washington Post asked how long a government should remain in office "if it has grossly misled the public on a critical issue—the nature and extent of its own investigation of alleged corruption in its midst; if two of its principal figures and assorted lesser lights had been forced to resign; if two of its former Cabinet members had been indicted for crimes; if 'illegal as well as unethical' conduct had been conceded to have occurred in the campaign that brought it to office; if it had plainly engaged in a massive effort to obstruct justice; if it had approved a broad campaign of admittedly illegal security measures in clear violation of individual rights?"

Mr. Mitchell, besides being indicted, was up to his elbows in all this jiggery-pokery. In addition, he was busy selling the country to such devout Republican clientele as ITT and the good old milk and wheat lobbies.

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MR. MITCHELL'S assertion that he has "never stolen any money" would be pathetic if it were not so clearly Machiavellian. I recall a mover and shaker in a previous, non-Republican administration haughtily explaining to me: "Money is for thieves. The name of this game is power, baby."

The only purpose in having money is to buy power. If you can get the power without stealing, why steal? If you can bug and lie and burgle to get the power without stealing, why not? Hitler never cared about money. Nor did Mussolini much. Nor did Napoleon much, except for his relatives. They had the power.

Mr. Mitchell didn't steal money; so far as I know. But he did steal power, as we all now know. That the power has become tarnished as its origins are becoming known is either a bit of luck or a miracle. I'll take it either way.