

*What we cannot do in a courtroom via criminal prosecutions to curtail the activities of some of these groups, IRS [the Internal Revenue Service] could do by administrative action. Moreover, valuable intelligence-type information could be turned up by IRS as a result of their field audits.*

—1970 memorandum from former White House intelligence aide, Tom Charles Huston, to former presidential chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman. Submitted to the Ervin committee by John W. Dean III, former White House counsel.

So you can add the Internal Revenue Service to the list: the tax collection agency of government now joins those other powerful and supposedly apolitical agencies of government which the Nixon administration has sought to corrupt for the cheapest of reasons. When you paid your taxes on or before April 15 of the past few years, did you realize that if you had expressed your open, political disagreement with any administration policy you might become the object of a White House effort to target you for tax investigation? Did you stop to consider that included in that hefty tax bill you were paying were funds for the salaries of men—your employees—who were spending their time and your money looking for ways to use tax audits to gather “intelligence-type information” on you? Probably not. Even those who fancy themselves pretty wise in the ways of Washington have been in for a series of shocks in the past few days and weeks. No grant of extraordinary power, no public trust—as it seems—is too fragile or too important for the Nixon administration to abuse.

For disclosure of the newest batch of squalors, we have Mr. Dean to thank, if “thank” is the appropriate word. As the President’s former counsel continues his controversial, low-key testimony, it seems to us far too early to render even a provisional or preliminary judgment on its validity as a challenge to Mr. Nixon’s version of the White House role in the Watergate burglary and cover-up. But Mr. Dean has offered, as a sort of by-product of his testimony, a further and even more distressing glimpse into the ways of the Nixon administration—into its contempt for the law and for the fundamental and essential relationship of a democratic government to its private citizens. Mr. Dean himself is author of one of the more repellant documents entered into evidence, a 1971 memorandum to Mr. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman concerning “how we can maximize the fact of our incumbency in dealing with persons known to be active in their opposition to our administration.” Among its suggestions was the naming of a “project coordinator” to “determine what sorts of dealings these individuals have with the federal government and how we can best screw them (e.g. grant availability, federal contracts, litigation, prosecution, etc.).”

So the enormous power of the United States government was to be trained on its own citizens, and advantage was clearly to be taken of the fact that most citizens (of whatever political leaning) could hardly imagine that these various powers would be systematically misused. But they were. What, after all, do we know by now? That the Central Intelligence Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Secret Service, the Department of Justice, the Internal Revenue Service and the federal courts were all among the instruments the White House sought to use to consolidate and enlarge its powers, to obliterate its opposition and to deceive the general public into the bargain.

“We,” “us,” “our”—there is a very private, very possessive approach in all this incriminating prose to the instruments and institutions of government. And there is, correspondingly, a very narrow notion of what constitutes political respectability. The latter can only be defined evidently by negatives. Those who are not “loyal” to the political fortunes of President Nixon, as determined by his roughneck assistants, qualify for what Mr. Dean described—it takes the breath away—as the “Enemies List.” As with popular songs, there is even a “top twenty.” Much of this seems to have been the handiwork of Charles Colson, undertaken in cooperation with Mr. Dean, Gordon Strachan, Lawrence Higby (still employed by the administration) and others. In the papers Mr. Dean made available to the Senate committee, the names of these “enemies” occasionally turn up along with recommended government tax or other action designed to harm them or with suggestions for particular inquiry. As in, for instance, the following:

- “Halperin, Morton, leading executive at Common Cause [also a former member of Henry Kissinger’s White House staff]: A scandal here would be most helpful.”

And again:

“Conyers, John, Congressman, Detroit: Coming on fast. Emerging as a leading black anti-Nixon spokesman. Has a known weakness for white females.”

The listings apparently come from the memo traffic between Mr. Dean and Mr. Colson’s White House office. The paper in question is headed: “Subject: Opponent priority activity.” The priority seemed to be the use of federal funds and federal offices and federal power to dig up embarrassing, intimidating information on these prospective victims and to utilize that information either to retaliate against them for political divergence from “our” cause or to discredit them and thus their opposition to “our” policies or to compel them, one way or the other, to shut up. It all seems to be a piece with the bugging, tapping, burglary and related surveillance we have heard about before. Can anyone any longer believe that these things were really done in the name of “national security” as the President has so piously proclaimed? Does it not smack more of intimidation and blackmail for the President’s narrow, personal political interests?

Three times now Mr. Nixon has addressed the public on what he is pleased to call the “deplorable” Watergate “incident.” It is not an incident; it is a way of life we are learning about. But not once has Mr. Nixon indicated that he understands what is so chilling and so profoundly inimical to the democratic spirit in these corruptions—let alone that he finds them repulsive. Some of the foot soldiers of the conspiracy are still in his administration and others who have left are still high in his regard and apparently even working on his behalf. The President is “fighting back” by preparing a kind of legal brief exonerating himself from criminal complicity in the break-ins and subsequent obstructions of justice. Is that really what the American people want to hear from the President? Or do they want to know what constitutes a “friend” and what an “enemy” in his opinion—and whether or not he realizes who the country’s real and most dangerous enemies are in this situation?