

Enemies of the People

By Tom Wicker

CHICAGO—I have had a mixed reaction to being named on a long “master list” of enemies of Richard Nixon and his Administration, and on another list of “less than twenty” particular enemies that Mr. John Dean forwarded on Sept. 14, 1971, to an aide of Mr. H. R. Haldeman.

My first emotion was plain indignation. Like most of the American people, I tend—probably too much so in any case—to identify the President with the nation, hence with its people. I know I am not an enemy of the nation or of the people, and I resent any such suggestion.

But I also felt a flash of fear. I have relatives, children, who could be hurt; like anyone else, I have human flaws that clever investigators might exploit and a reasonably good name of which I am jealous.

But natural indignation and ignoble fear quickly faded in a kind of puzzlement. I would never have expected the Nixon Administration to list me as a friend, nor do I want any Administration to do so. But I had always thought that political conflict was in the nature of “agreeing to disagree”—that no matter how bitter and vigorously expressed their political differences might become, political opponents could maintain a civil relationship and be mutually respectful at least of the rights and integrity of the other.

In his last years in office, for example, President Johnson would have had every reason—if he thought about it at all—to be strongly resentful of my expressed attitude on his conduct of the war in Vietnam. But it never occurred to me then that I or anyone would be placed by him on a list of “enemies” to “screw” through tax investigation or other abuses of governmental power. Nor do I believe the Johnson Administration did any such thing; the Nixon Administration’s determination to “get” or “screw” political opponents, even potential opponents, by any means, illegal or otherwise, seems to me far beyond any reasonable view of the nature of democracy, or any generally accepted political practice.

Even so, I was also amazed in reading the “master list,” the smaller Dean list, and a “priority” list of enemies prepared by Mr. Charles Colson, another Nixon aide, to discover how ludicrous all this listing was. Not that most of the people on the lists are not

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estimable; but what were these important men doing, in their high offices, taking time out from the great national affairs to put down the names of movie stars, reporters, businessmen, political contributors and the like, as “enemies” demanding surreptitious counterattack?

From the most powerful institution in the world, did these petty men have nothing better to do than to gaze, with fear and paranoia, at outspoken citizens, and call them “enemies” for being so?

In fact, the comic-opera aspects of the “enemies” lists tempted me to the kind of flippancy and derision that the witty Ken Galbraith—himself on the “master list”—recently recommended as the best way to deal with the Nixon Administration. All sorts of wisecracks suggest themselves—“The King’s honors list,” for example—but the truth is that however ludicrous they may be, these lists are not really funny.

They are sad. They are sad because they show that even great power could not make of Mr. Nixon and his aides anything but small and fearful men. They are sad because they disclose a great nation being led by men unworthy of her and her history. They are sad because they represent so graphically, for so many people, the last crumbling of illusion—the final evidence that there is nothing magical or ennobling about the Presidency, nothing about American power that makes it less corrupting than any other brand of power.

But if the enemy lists are sad for those reasons, like so many other aspects of the Watergate revelations, they are hopeful, too. Disillusionment is enlightenment; to know things as they are is better than to believe things as they seem. The lists confirm what the 1970 internal security plan and the Ellsberg break-in suggested—that the Watergate burglary itself was only the tip of the knife, that American democracy has been retrieved in the nick of time from the police state it so nearly became.

That is why, once indignation and fear had passed, the temptation to laugh had been overcome, and puzzlement had turned to sadness, I knew I belonged on those lists. Of such people as those who compiled them, and the man they served so zealously, who would not be an enemy?
