

Era of Investigation

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, July 11—In Mr. Nixon's first term, he moved from an era of confrontation to an era of negotiation; in his second term, Democrats are determined to move us into an era of investigation.

"What the President knew and when he knew it." That was the goal of the Senate's Watergate investigation, succinctly stated and widely accepted as the ultimate target of truth-seekers.

At least, that used to be the accepted goal back when a lot of people assumed evidence would be brought forth to prove that the President had knowledge of a crime. Now, however, it appears that all we will see is unsubstantiated charges and irate denials. No proof. No impeachment. No resignation.

Where will that leave us? Will the accusers and the Senate committee announce that because they have not been able to pin a crime on the President, the presumption of innocence prevails and he should be permitted to go back to the business of governing the country without harassment?

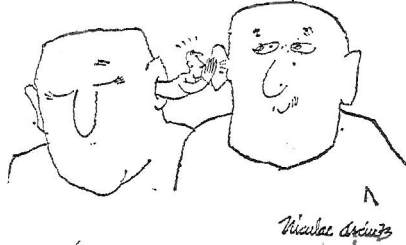
Not, as Eliza Doolittle would put it, bloody likely. The Democratic campaign of 1972 is finally, if belatedly, under way.

The Democratic strategy is to proceed in the next four years to investigate the last four years. The Robespierres of retribution, reveling in each new revelation, have a wide range of investigations already under way in addition to the televised hearings:

Grand juries are burrowing into Watergate and related matters in Washington, D. C., New York, Houston, Orlando and Los Angeles. Senate Appropriations and Armed Services Committees are both looking into C.I.A. and F.B.I. involvement, and House Armed Services, Commerce, and Banking and Currency Committees will have their day on C.I.A., I.T.T., Mexican laundering, grain deals and you name it. Four civil suits filed by Common Cause, Ralph Nader's Public Citizen, the Democratic National Committee and a former National Security Council staffer will, the litigators hope, generate publicity for years, as will S.E.C. and F.B.I. investigations, and the anticipated criminal trials that could turn Washington into Nuremberg.

Along with all that, the General Accounting Office will frequently be heard from. The G.A.O. is a creature of the Congress, now controlled by Democrats, set up to investigate the executive branch, now controlled (if that is the right word) by Republicans. On efficiency audits, G.A.O. has been a useful and generally nonpartisan

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agency. On its new election assignment, however, the G.A.O. monitors financial disclosure of Presidential elections only; Congress will not let it near the elections of Representatives and Senators, but nobody complains about this double standard.

It's a full plate for lovers of investigatory democracy. About the only political campaign scandal that will not be looked into is the misuse of the F.B.I. to bug the telephones of Republican candidates and their supporters in the Nixon-Agnew campaign of 1968 (but that happened when Ramsey Clark was Attorney General, so it could not have been an intrusion into civil liberties).

In sum, we have an onslaught of five grand juries, at least six Congressional committees, the G.A.O., S.E.C. and F.B.I., not to mention the growing beachhead of avid Kennedy and McGovern hands who make up the new Cox's army at the Justice Department.

Even a witch hunt can turn up some real witches. But sooner or later, it will dawn on more people that investigating is not governing, that constantly looking backward is not the way to move forward, and that the nation is not well served by an unrelenting campaign along a Government-wide front to tie the Chief Executive's hands.

The bipartisan revulsion at the Watergate scandal has given way to a campaign by partisans in nonpartisan clothing to retroactively "win" the 1972 election. Since they now know they cannot bring down the President, they intend to continually challenge his legitimacy—in effect, to wear him down.

The probephiliacs will not succeed. The eye of the storm has passed, and Mr. Nixon did not blink. We may be getting into the longest permanent floating investigation game the nation has ever seen, but even a properly chastened President is not the sort to let himself be tromped on much longer.