

The Sad Young Men

By William V. Shannon

WASHINGTON, July 24—They are Richard Nixon's children, these sad young men who come day after day before the Senate committee. They tell their stories of files neatly kept, of "talking papers" and "action papers," of trips in Air Force One and messages relayed on "secure" telephones, and of their gradual participation in crime. The end came so swiftly, so unexpectedly. In a few, unraveling months, they moved from the hushed corridors of power to the strained recollections of the grand jury room and the frantic bargaining for immunity.

The Nixon Administration far exceeded any of its predecessors in putting young men in high places. Ronald Ziegler, John W. Dean 3d, Egil Krogh, Gordon Strachan, Dwight Chapin and a dozen others were in their late twenties or early thirties when first appointed. For several of them, their jobs in the White House were the first jobs of any consequence they ever held.

Except for one or two who had the good sense to pull back from personal involvement at the last moment, they turned blind eyes to the wickedness going on around them or willingly participated in perjury, burglary, destruction of evidence and so on. Why were they all so susceptible? Why did none of them show any moral independence or backbone?

It is equally important to ask why the two senior men on the staff—H. R. Haldeman, 46, and John D. Ehrlichman, 48—surrounded themselves with these much younger and unqualified aides.

One could reasonably conclude from the Watergate fiasco that only older, more experienced persons should be appointed even to middle-level jobs in the White House. But that would be a generational slur on many able young men and women of 28 or 30 or 32 who could rise to the challenge of work at the White House. The Nixon young men, after all, were not prodigies, first in their class or editors of their law review or authors of promising books.

Why did Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Ehrlichman not choose the best talent available? Did they want callow aides who would do what they were told even if it was illegal or unethical? Or was it only an accident that there were so many willing accomplices on the staff before and after the crime of Watergate?

As power monopolists, the Haldeman-Ehrlichman team did not want anyone around of comparable age or

greater experience who might challenge their supremacy. Even a young man would have to have a certain pliancy to stand for the bullying that Mr. Haldeman inflicted on Gordon Strachan, telephoning him at 4 A.M. to bawl him out and requiring him to wear a "beeper" so that his whereabouts would never be in doubt.

Familiar from earlier Nixon campaigns with political "dirty tricks," both senior men had to find aides prepared to accommodate themselves to the chosen methods of their superiors. The young men they selected come from comfortable and a few of them from wealthy family backgrounds. They are socially poised, members of the "right" fraternities, successful campus politicians and big men on campus. They are gentlemen athletes, swimming and playing tennis, suntanned and well-dressed.

There is, psychologically speaking, an interesting symbiosis between Mr. Nixon himself and these young men. The President, reared in poverty, physically graceless and socially awkward, who even now finds it difficult to make small talk, a classic "grind" from an obscure college, is in marked contrast to these generally good-looking, easily articulate, self-confident youths. They represent the kind of young man that Richard Nixon would like to have been, 30 or 35 years ago.

If these young men acted out Mr. Nixon's idealized daydream of himself, they in turn took their cues from him and his senior aides. Completely orthodox in their social outlook, ferociously ambitious, intelligent but not original or erudite or intellectually curious, these young men served only their own careers. They had no guiding ethic except to do what their bosses wanted.

It is no accident that two of their clichés are "at that point in time" and "in that time frame." None of them ever seems to have studied any American history or political philosophy.

Yet it is impossible not to feel sorry for these sad young men, their hopes and in some instances their lives blighted. If they had served a President who by precept and example had shown them what is not done in the White House, what standards have to be observed, what sacrifices of political and personal self-interest are required by public service, they might have learned gradually and painlessly what Watergate has taught them so harshly. But who, knowing his record, would ever choose Richard Nixon as his moral preceptor?

William V. Shannon is substituting for James Reston, who is on vacation.