

Bureaucrats Would Avoid Watergate



By
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Now that the President has settled back from successful trips to Peking and Moscow, he ought to take a whack at erasing the curtain of suspicion and ignorance that has grown up between the Eastern White House and the Federal Triangle, where the career bureaucracy dwells.

Convinced that the government he inherited was a hotbed of Democrat wolves clothed as new-born GOP lambs, key Nixon advisers began in 1969 to set up "little governments" within the White House, to make sure things got done the proper way.

While talking decentralization, the White House in fact grabbed more power, revamping the Office of Management and Budget into a giant overseer and decision-maker which took away even petty prerogatives from key federal agencies.

After the bitter pill of the Walter Hickel letter—which apparently was drafted by a young, summer intern rather than a wild-eyed Interior Department bureaucrat—the White House decided to place key political operatives in each department, to keep an eye on

Cabinet officers who might get to feeling their oats.

The result, as we have seen and read from the Watergate hearings, was an incredible number of super-smart corporation types who did stupid, and sometimes very illegal things, because they *thought* they knew who had ordered them. No right-thinking bureaucrat would have moved on such an assumption.

One Watergate team player, with a flair for the dramatic, left the office of a key White House aide convinced he had been ordered to liquidate, literally, an "enemy" of the administration. He was chased down, and given a translation from Madison Avenue to English which clarified his assignment, much to the later relief of the White House and the "enemy" in question.

Instead of using gifted amateurs and high-paid refugees from private industry as its Watergate operatives, the administration would have been wise to assign the chore to some agency of government. Then it wouldn't have happened.

It wouldn't have happened not because the bureaucracy is all that inefficient, but because various people who have protected their General Schedule rears for years would have demanded written authorization before they jimmed anybody's locks or attempted to put Love Potion Number Nine pills into the milk cocktail of some

starry-eyed McGovern delegate.

The bureaucracy, for better or worse, wouldn't have played the game which—whether you think it a high crime or routine dirty politics—has brought this administration to the brink with Congress and the public.

All this is by way of leading into an important "white paper" recently put out by the bipartisan, business-financed National Civil Service League. The League, with a board of directors composed of well-known past stars of Democratic and Republican regimes, wants the President to lean more on the "do-nothing" bureaucracy, and less on men who are totally suspicious of it.

NCSL's executive director Jean Courturier believes the President would have known about Watergate sooner, if he had relied upon career federal employees for information, rather than on dedicated political servants who apparently didn't want to tell the President unpleasant things.

"But the sad fact is that the President and the career bureaucracy have not been faring well in their relationships with each other these past few years. Courturier believes that the

Nixon Administration has hurt itself by "politicizing" the civil service.

"Certainly every president needs a political support staff. But he also needs a career civil service in the agencies to advise him, to protect him, and to see that no one around him uses the Justice Department, the CIA, the FBI, the Internal Revenue Service, or any other public agency for partisan purposes. The career civil service offers dedication, skill, loyalty, experience and—yes—even the ability independently to 'blow the whistle' on political hanky-panky. Every president needs this kind of support," said Courturier.

Every recent President has surrounded himself with men "he could trust" only to discover later that in their zeal to protect him, or for fear of angering him, some real bone-head plays were called in his name. Mr. Nixon may well be a victim of that sort of protection.

Had it been in charge of the Watergate and related matters, the career bureaucracy by its timid, plodding, self-survival nature, would have fallen on its face. That sort of prevention is worth a ton of later cures.