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Watergate as Ethics Lesson: Jeb Magruder and Prof. Coffin

As a witness before the Senate Watergate committee last June Jeb Stuart Magruder testified that his acceptance of illegal activities as a White House aide and Nixon re-election official was conditioned by the "continuing violations of the law done by men like William Sloane Coffin." Coffin, a Yale professor active in the

opposition to the Vietnam war, had been Magruder's friend and ethics teacher as chaplain at Williams College in the late 1950s. Recently, writer Studs Terkel brought Coffin and Magruder together for a four-hour tape-recorded conversation. This edited transcript is excerpted from Harper's magazine.



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Coffin: "Why was loyalty to the boss so important?"

MAGRUDER: Occasionally, people stare at me on the street as though to say: "Your face is familiar. I've seen you somewhere. Were you on television?" I'm getting better tables at restaurants now. I guess that's a true test of American values. It's about the only fringe benefit that has come from this.

Today, on the shuttle coming up from Washington, a professor from the University of Michigan came up and asked me if I now understood the difference between civil disobedience and some of the things we may have engaged in. I said that I had gone through this before with Bill Coffin and had understood the difference all along, but I did think it was useful to say what I said at the Senate hearings. I thought it was important for people to understand how I felt. I've always thought civil disobedience is a perfectly acceptable part of our system, a good part. But the anti-war people, especially during Mayday, did violent things. They were oriented toward chaos. If we hadn't moved in and made mass arrests there would have been a shutdown of the city by the demonstrators. There was a tremendous amount of violence.

COFFIN: You told me Watergate was inevitable. You were disturbed by widespread business practices, the way America operates.

MAGRUDER: I would never say the country caused Watergate. Specific individuals are to blame. But there are certain values, certain characteristics and habits in this country—a desire to get ahead, impatience. Our overwhelming legal structure creates in the average businessman, the average worker, a feeling that he has to do his share of shaving, whether it be on his income tax or on his expense account.

Sometimes you just go along. There were decisions the President made that I didn't agree with. But since he was President and I was an aide, it wasn't something I should do anything about. If you're very much against it, you should resign. Once a policy is made, you should go ahead.

I stuck my neck out on one occasion. Election Eve of 1970 we were going to run a 15-minute tape of the President as a cross-country commercial. I indicated to Mr. Haldeman the tape was unacceptable. It was a very strident speech and there was a z-z-z-z going through the middle of the tape. I said it would be a disaster. And it was. Muskie followed, sitting by the fireside up in Maine.

It had a tremendous effect on our attitude toward the '72 election. We became very concerned. The President dropped in popularity and Muskie rose. The first six months of '71, we were running 5 to 7 points behind Muskie in every Harris and Gallup poll. We didn't know at the time that China and Russia would work out perfectly for us.

COFFIN: What was your reaction to the invasion of Cambodia?

MAGRUDER: There were disagreements within the staff. But we all felt since we're

not in the decision-making process, it was appropriate to follow the policies the President set. You could disagree privately, but not publicly.

COFFIN: Did that trouble you at all?

MAGRUDER: I subverted my personal feelings to what I felt was the President's desire. I think that's the root cause of Watergate. I remember the case of Ernest Fitzgerald. He was the man at the Pentagon who had been cost-conscious. Clark Mollenhoff and I were the only two on the White House staff who were advocates of Mr. Fitzgerald's position. We were overruled. I didn't agree with the position but I accepted it.

COFFIN: Why was loyalty to the boss so important?

MAGRUDER: Kennedy's men had the same sort of loyalty. Johnson's aides did. The presidency, more than a corporation or a university, breeds a certain necessity for loyalty—personal loyalty, to the man as against the office. At the university, you can sit and discuss alternatives. But if you're working at the White House, you enjoy your job, you've got four children, you're not rich—sure, you can leave and go somewhere else. But is it that important? So you subvert individual judgment over here to gain a more effective policy over there. It's the same thing in business.

COFFIN: When you subvert your opinion, you are in effect subverting yourself. Your identity is at the mercy of the person to whom you're loyal. Right?

MAGRUDER: That's true. You can't work in any structured situation without having this subversion going on a daily basis. Most of the cases I can think of—with the exception of the war—were not great moral issues. They were practical issues.

COFFIN: What disturbed you most in all these revelations?

MAGRUDER: The taping. I was dealing with the senior staff people at the White House in good faith and they disappointed me.

COFFIN: What upset you was that you sacrificed a good deal of yourself for loyalty. And the loyalty you gave was not returned.

MAGRUDER: It wasn't that Haldeman didn't trust me. It was that he was using me. That disturbed me more than anything else. It's a personal feeling. A feeling of hurt.

COFFIN: This affects you more than the revelation of the 3,000-some sorties over Cambodia?

MAGRUDER: I'm very disturbed by that, the lying and so on. It's inexcusable. And the bombing of the civilian population. But the taping is so personal. Most of us are affected by what we can directly relate to. It's natural.

COFFIN: If you start giving away your right to say no, there's an erosion of self. If Watergate's inevitable, it's because life is consequential. One thing leads to another.

MAGRUDER: It's a question of slippage. I sort of slipped right into it. Each act you take leads you to the next act, and eventually you end up with a Watergate. It's very typical in large corporations. Someone else is influential. He has an idea and he gets the idea approved. You're the one who has to carry it out. You don't agree with it, but it's important to satisfy the group consensus: "It isn't that important and I might as well go along."

COFFIN: I am startled by the fact that there are so few political resignations in the country. George Ball said one thing and believed another. He justified himself by saying, "I'm just a hired hand." It sounds as if you're loyal because you're afraid of losing your position in the power structure.

MAGRUDER: It's very difficult to set your own standard and continue in the power structure. I always felt I could do more by staying in the system. Maybe that's just the way of satisfying my conscience. I wanted to stay with the government for the next four years, but I was determined to get out of the White House and into an agency where I'd have more independence. I followed instructions and did things I did not agree with because I thought it was important for my personal success—and also for the good of the President.

COFFIN: It's interesting how slippage occurs. It starts as a matter of public relations. You justify it in the name of national security. And what comes out is blatant lying. It starts as a small misrepresentation, by the way in which you package your product.

MAGRUDER: Truth has now become my best product. There's a world of difference today than before I decided to tell the truth. I feel comfortable.

COFFIN: Sure. Lying to cover up is a reflex of insecurity. And public relations is sometimes its handmaiden.

MAGRUDER: There are no movements where these techniques aren't used. The anti-war movement was effective in PR. They did things well, to be sure they got maximum media coverage. You have to be careful in impugning one person's PR objectives, where you are using the same means.

COFFIN: The insecurity of the administration produced its downfall, really, didn't it? As Teddy White said: Watergate's like a millionaire kleptomaniac. He's got a million but he still has to have more.

MAGRUDER: Again, you've got to go back to '70. When planning started for the campaign, these activities seemed important. By the time it wasn't important, it was too late

to change. Once plans get in motion, you rarely stop them.

COFFIN: An individual could.

MAGRUDER: An individual could? That's a good point. I could have stopped Liddy. But Liddy was more dedicated to achieving his ends than I was concerned about what he was doing. You're absolutely right. But other people interacted and thought it was best for him to stay. Because it was best for him to stay. Because it wasn't that important to me, I didn't stand my ground. I should have.

COFFIN: Why wasn't it that important to you?

MAGRUDER: Because it was just a minor part of the campaign that did not strike me as being relevant. I had at the time over 25 division heads reporting to me. I was concerned with the substance of the campaign: spending \$10 million in advertising, \$6 million in direct mail, \$3 million on our telephone program, and another couple of million in our surrogate program.

TERKEL: You were doing what a successful young corporate executive would do today.

MAGRUDER: That's what a campaign is. It's not going over junk intelligence. But there was a desire for intelligence and I thought people wanted it. I could have stopped it by saying, "This is ridiculous."

I felt good when I watched myself on national television. I said what I had to say without trying to evade my responsibilities. I didn't say, "Poor little me." There was some of that in the other witnesses. I was 38 and knew what I was doing.

TERKEL: Do I still sense that awe, that loyalty to those you consider your superiors?

MAGRUDER: It's not loyalty, it's fairness. I can't blame someone above me for getting me involved, if I was able to understand the nature of the act.

TERKEL: Where are the heroes of yesteryear? What about John Mitchell?

MAGRUDER: He was a hero to me, no question about it. I still have a tremendous affection for him. He treated me well. I found him fair and above board in all his dealings. Unlike his public image. He's one of the finest people I've known. What's happened doesn't change that. If you discarded someone because he disappointed you, you wouldn't be much of a friend.

In the year and a half I worked for him, I thought most of his decisions were excellent. He has an excellent mind. I didn't agree with all his activities as Attorney General. He certainly was not a civil libertarian. But on a personal note, he was a very fine person to work for. If you said, "My wife's not feeling well, I'd like to leave early," he'd say, "Jeb, leave right now." At the White

House, that was not a typical response to personal problems. He was more of a father than a boss. He's a hero to me, as much as a person my age has heroes.

COFFIN: That's what bothers me, Jeb — the littleness of loyalties. We're talking about a country, the most powerful in the world, and you're talking about loyalty to the boss. He was kind and let you take the afternoon off when your wife was sick. But he didn't hesitate to fool around with the Constitution when it suited his aims. What bothers me terribly are the consequences of this whole affair. It's one thing to say: he doesn't beat his wife, he's a good fellow. But, if by his actions he belittles his country, that's something else. But perhaps in public as in private life we get what we deserve to a much larger degree than we want to admit.

What disturbs me most about Watergate is that the failure lay in being caught. It's not the truth that has set people free. They're still prisoners of their falsehood. It's only that they were caught. There still hasn't been a confrontation with the truth.

MAGRUDER: There has been for those who decided to tell the truth.

COFFIN: Even here, one has a slight feeling that honesty *pays*. The thing I'm missing is what the 19th Century theologian [Horace] Bushnell talked about: the expulsive power of a new affection. It's the power of a new loyalty that drives out the old loyalty. Like every human being in the world, you had a longing for your place in the universe. We all need that. You found it. Now you've lost it. But the new one hasn't been found yet. There's not a new loyalty in whose name Jeb Magruder can begin again.

MAGRUDER: It's taking some time. You can't switch from here to there immediately. You can't take four years of my life and say it was all wrong. China and Russia came through beautifully. It would be a mistake for me all of a sudden to flip-flop from one extreme to another. I've got to find out what I did right and continue to do that and realize what I did wrong and change that part of me.

COFFIN: In my own life, I've learned far more from my failures than I have from my successes. If Jeb can confront these failures with honesty, it will be healthy for many, because his experience is the experience of almost all of us. The slippage and sliding and shaving and loyalties that are too small and the need to be on the team—if all this gets examined and put before the American public, it can be terribly useful. The greatest tragedy for Jeb would be to have the experience and miss the meaning.

MAGRUDER: Well, I think it would be a greater tragedy than the Watergate affair itself if people didn't learn from our experience.