

Mr. Nixon, 'Perspective' and the Press

In amplifying the charge that the news media are somehow to blame for the crisis in confidence that has beset Mr. Nixon, the President's spokesmen have been concentrating on a special theme: the presumed failure of those reporting and describing events of the past several months to put those events in "perspective." Presidential press aide Gerald Warren and presidential son-in-law David Eisenhower are among those who troubled to make the point in recent days. And elsewhere on this page, Robert C. Maynard describes how the concept of missing "perspective" figures in the anti-press "offensive" being conducted from the White House by Deputy Director of Communications Kenneth W. Clawson. In a special sense we think the argument is sound: given the nature of the roller coaster ride on which the nation has been taken by Mr. Nixon, it has scarcely been possible to put each new plunge and turn and twist into the context of what has gone before. But we would quickly add two observations. One is that the administration itself has been at pains to isolate these jarring events from one another, to present and discuss them without benefit of any overview of the context in which they occur—without benefit, that is, of "perspective." The other is that the administration appears to be at least tactically wise in doing so. For such perspective in fact tends to enhance, rather than diminish, the grounds for public suspicion and alarm.

By way of illustrating the White House's own penchant for considering these events in a vacuum, we invite your attention to the way in which the President and his aides have assiduously sought to isolate the whole Cox-Richardson-Ruckelshaus affair from its relevant background and obvious meaning, treating the issues raised as narrow procedural matters that have to do merely with the President's technical right to discharge an executive branch employee, not with the implications of his firing a man who had been hired to preside over an investigation of criminal wrongdoing in high places in which Mr. Nixon himself was at least tangentially involved. As a matter of fact, the principal historical perspective the White House tried to provide in that affair had more to do with history than perspective. We have in mind the sudden, ostentatious use of the term "Judge" to describe Sen. John Stennis, a practice newly employed by both the President and his aides and one which required their reaching back over a quarter of a century to the time when Senator Stennis last served as a Mississippi state trial judge. As Patrick Buchanan explained the thinking of Mr. Nixon on the so-called "compromise" on the tapes: "The President said let's have Judge Stennis hear the tapes rather than Judge Sirica." That is some kind of change of venue—from a sitting judge to a retired judge, from a federal court that is hearing the case to a state court that is not and never was.

If one is to put these matters into genuine perspective—as distinct from playing games with them—the result, as we say, is if anything more damaging to the administration than the perspective-free reporting it professes to abhor. Consider only the subject of official denials of allegations of impropriety and wrongdoing. Mr. Nixon, judging from his press conference remarks a couple of weeks ago, seems to believe that the media should regard as "untrue" stories or information that have been denied

by the White House. But surely it is the presence, not the absence, of "perspective" on these denials that has so weakened their plausibility and force. Is there, after all, anything of consequence which we know now about Watergate and related depredations in high places that was not originally hotly denied? We were told that there was no connection whatever between people in authority at the committee to re-elect Mr. Nixon and the Watergate break-in itself. We were told "categorically" by the President that no one on the team that has since departed in disgrace had any connection with that episode either. We were told by a former Attorney General of the United States that he had no idea whatever how the break-in had come about, although he later acknowledged that he had presided over three separate meetings in which the Watergate burglary's mastermind, Mr. Liddy, had set forth a scheme for just such dirty tricks. We were told by a Vice President of the United States that he would never resign and that he was innocent of charges of criminal wrongdoing. "Outrageously false and preposterous," "fundamentally inaccurate," "damned lies," "collection of absurdities," "blatant effort at character assassination"—these were among the locutions chosen for the official denials that were forthcoming in an apparently endless stream over the many months it took to arrive at our present state of knowledge. And throughout, those perpetrating the false denials continued to insist that this debased currency had value, that the denial as issued by a man holding high office was sufficient to establish the truth. As the former Attorney General of the United States, John Mitchell, put it with his customary inelegance when he was asked whether he had some connection with the secret fund that paid for the Watergate burglary: "All that crap you're putting in the paper? It's all been denied."

We would remind you that at each step of the way these inoperative denials have been accompanied by the most impassioned attacks on the news media that made public the information the administration did not wish to have known. And we would remind you too that among those misled by the systematic deception emanating from the highest offices in the land were men such as Senator Goldwater and Clark MacGregor, one a senior Republican legislator and party leader, the other the chairman of Mr. Nixon's 1972 re-election campaign. "I believe this kid," Senator Goldwater said of John Dean, then serving as White House counsel, when Mr. Dean was functioning as a key operative of the Watergate cover-up. Within the past week, Mr. MacGregor, who unleashed one of the most vitriolic attacks on the press of the '72 campaign for stories on the Watergate, told a committee of Congress that he had been lied to and deceived by Mr. Nixon's most important White House and campaign aides on the subject during the campaign.

So much for perspective: it doesn't do the President's case a lot of good. What it shows up to terrible effect is the reason for present public skepticism concerning Mr. Nixon's assertions of his own good faith and innocence as distinct from what he would have you believe is the bad faith and guilt of those who convey the news. Put in perspective, the news of 1973 is that the public can no longer accept at face value the word or the solemn commitment of those who hold the highest and most respected offices in the land.