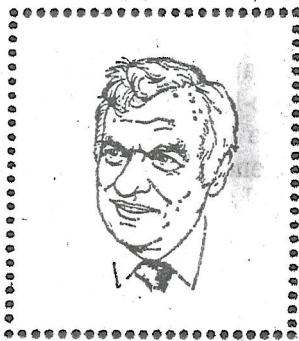


Charles McCabe Himself

The Tangled Web

IT WAS Sir Walter Scott, in his ballad about Lochinvar, who gave us the lines: "O, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive!" There can hardly be anyone in America who would today feel these words so keenly as Mr. Richard M. Nixon, who must have learned them in school.

Let us consider the famed Watergate tapes. If you keep your eyes on two things, and never let them stray, you will find the inner consistency of all the President's tactical turnings and follies. These have outwardly puzzled so many of us. These two things are the living, physical presence of two men: H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman.



These are the two men, known to be his greatest loyalists, who can nail Mr. Nixon to the mast. If he is guilty of anything, including conspiracy to obstruct justice, these babies know it, because they knew everything he did. They knew everything he did for the exact reason that they usually *did* it, acting as Nixon's chief administrative officer.

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FROM THE MOMENT they were fired, the deal has been this: These men must not go to jail. Even Mr. John Mitchell was more expendable than they; because he knew less. Now, the strategy for keeping H & E out of jail was simple and devilish: Hold onto the tapes, or any other information that might either convict or exculpate them in court.

This done, there is hardly a judge in the land who would not throw out of court any accusations against the two men, on the solid ground that information which could contribute to their defense was being withheld from the trial court. That's the way we do things in this country.

Mr. Nixon stuck to this strategy desperately, and as long as he could. The strategy broke down under the combined assaults of Judge Sirica and former prosecutor Archie Cox on the strained Presidential interpretations of executive privilege, which read total protected secrecy for the acts of a president. The President had to give up on the tapes. Give them up, his way.

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THIS MEANT, among other things, that H & E were now available to the normal processes of criminal justice. They could be jailed. Thus, the positions of both men, and of their former boss, were deeply endangered, assuming the two were indictable on at least perjury and obstruction of justice.

The position of the President was ever more endangered. The nearer his Palace Guard came to jail, the nearer he was to their total disclosure in a plea bargaining process. There is just so far even absolute personal loyalty can go. Men like H. and E. don't go to the penitentiary for it.

The curious events of last week become quite clear in this context. There was the sudden and strange disappearance of an 18-minute conversation between Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Nixon, held on June 20, 1972, three days after the Watergate burglary took place. When Prosecutor Cox subpoenaed this tape, which is perhaps the most critical and incriminating of all the Haldeman-Nixon conversations, he stated:

"There is every reason to infer that the meeting included discussion of the Watergate incident."

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THE REALLY UNEXPLAINED disappearance of this critical record from the face of the earth, if you follow my interpretation, is but another step in that process of desperate evasion which is necessary if the Messrs. H & E are not to make the bucket. These evasions and disappearances are the price of their silence.

The destruction of this latest tape, again in my view, had to be in response to extreme pressure from Mr. Haldeman. The act in itself, coming right after Mr. Nixon's talk to Republican governors assuring them that "if there are any bombs, I'm not aware of them," was a political disaster. The web is closing in. Its victim is Mr. Nixon. His resignation may no longer be voluntary, but forced by the friends he has left.