

Mr. Nixon's Latest Counterattack

What is our counter-attack? PR offensive to top this—hit the opposition w/ their activities . . . we shld be on the attack—for diversion.

WE QUOTE from some notes taken by the President's now-deposed aide, H. R. Haldeman, on a meeting he had with Mr. Nixon on June 20, 1972—a few days after the Watergate burglars had been arrested in Democratic headquarters. The notes were made public in Judge John Sirica's courtroom recently in connection with the 18-minute "hum" on a tape recording of the meeting in question. But our concern with them here is not their particular relation to the damaged tape or their conceivable usefulness in solving the mystery of what happened to that tape. Rather it is their substance: "PR offensive to top this . . . we shld be on the attack for diversion." Nineteen months later—19 months of incredible damage, at that—and in the face of persistent evidence that these so-called counterattacks and "PR" offensives are worthless except as agents of its own self-destruction, the administration seems to be "on the attack for diversion" again. We are evidently to have another counterattack, another response along the lines of that trotted out in June of 1972.

Not, one must suppose, because it was such a success—indeed, if it had succeeded there would be no reason for the President, 19 months later, still to be calculating ways to get out from under the Watergate mess. And yet the signs are all there:

- The White House-sponsored and White House-drafted attacks on some imagined culprits in all this who are supposedly small in number, vicious in intent and wholly partisan and ideological in nature;
- The peep-show presentation of fragmentary "evidence" to friendly observers, such as Sen. Hugh Scott, who can be counted on to proclaim the President's innocence on the basis of it;
- The heavy hints that a campaign to discredit Mr. Nixon's antagonists is in the making;
- And the information that Mr. Nixon himself has let it be known for the umpteenth time that he is going to "fight like hell."

Mr. Nixon's declaration, as reported by one of the group of Republican congressmen who met with him on Tuesday, is instructive—if disheartening. "There is a time to be timid," he said. "There is a time to be conciliatory. There is a time to fly and there is a time to fight. And I'm going to fight like hell." The ring of Ecclesiastes is od dhere for the resigned, even rather fatalistic, spirit of the original is conspicuously missing. In fact, Mr. Nixon invokes the idiom to announce his plans to strike out. And what is so interesting about these plans is that they are purely tactical. For surely this statement is little more than a handbook to more bobbing and weaving. And surely, so far as Watergate is and has been concerned, it was *always* a time to be conciliatory and *always* a time to fight like hell and *never* a time to fly or to be timid—assuming that the President had no motive other than to get at the truth and to fight those who sought to obstruct him in this pursuit. But from the beginning—alas—Mr. Nixon has seen things a different way, identified the threat and the danger as something else, and set out an objective that had less to do with discovery than with evasion and diversion. We are back to the immediate response of June 20, 1972, and the presidential instructions to Mr. Haldeman: "hit the opposition w/ their activities." That is presumably what is meant by fighting "like hell."

From the beginning, this presidential tactic—"you're another," "everyone does it" and the rest—has been fatally flawed, although Mr. Nixon himself seems incapable of recognizing as much. For one thing, by implication the tactic puts the President on the side of those who have committed the wrongdoing, as distinct

from those who have revealed and/or objected to it. To be sure, the President has on occasion invoked the homily about "two wrongs don't make a right"—but he has done so at the end of a litany of other people's crimes and lapses in such a way as to suggest that, in his view, two wrongs could easily make a Mexican stand-off. The White House's pre- and post-Watergate attempts to discredit those whose ideas and activities it disapproved of is a related part of this approach, and hardly much more edifying or effective than the "everybody does it" refrain. We can't help recalling that notation on the famous enemies list next to the name of a former Nixon White House aide who had left the administration and broken with it on some key issues. The notation read: "A scandal would be most helpful here."

Helpful. Helpful, one must ask, to what? To the pursuit of government's legitimate functions? To the composing of differences between the administration and its critics on a number of policy issues? The answer on both counts is obviously, No. Scandal on the part of those regarded as opponents is to be husbanded for "use" at the right time. It is to be utilized as a substitute for clear answers to clear questions or as a general diversion. And the same evidently can be said of outright misconduct. Evidently Mr. Nixon took the misconduct of his predecessors not as activity to be avoided or rejected or, early on, exposed, but rather as a mandate for misconduct of his own, not to mention as some kind of secret weapon to be hoarded for the day of "need." All the signs now are that that day is approaching and that, despite a lot of protestations that it tried but could not keep its information secret, the White House will be making available to the press and the Congress evidence in support of its thesis that its own crimes and improprieties have a long dishonorable history.

In one important sense, such revelations are of immense value: if they are true they should be made (should have been long ago, for that matter) and should be put into the fund of general public knowledge for the guidance of a country that clearly and desperately wishes to reform its institutions of government and to be purged of the systematic malpractices to which we have all been made privy or late. If you are shocked by unlawful surveillance and criminal acts on the part of your government, it cannot really matter to you in any significant way which party or which person was involved. The White House doesn't seem to understand that fact—but it is only one fact among many it doesn't understand. Another is that such information, though of enormous value in some respects, is valueless in others. It is valueless to answer the specific charges that have been made and specific questions that have been asked (by federal courts among others) concerning the President's own role in the web of corruption that has been uncovered over the past 19 months.

Mr. Nixon has a way of offering his countrymen information they did not seek and withholding that which they have asked for. He "gave" the country a "gift" of papers but he fought like a tiger to withhold the papers a special prosecutor was seeking in relation to specific crimes. He declines to provide information bearing on his own possible misconduct but sees to it that somehow information bearing on the misconduct of others, including his predecessors, is made available to the public. If you believe, as we do, that misconduct in government is not a party matter or a subject that should activate narrow personal loyalties, then you will agree that no investigation of the misuse of government power should be limited to the spectacular career of Richard M. Nixon. But if you take the matter sufficiently seriously to see it that way, you will also agree that Mr. Nixon cannot answer the grave charges that have been made concerning his own activities by contriving to let it be known that other people at other times did other things that ought to be explored.