

A Cautionary Tale

"Freedom for me is not a privilege but a right protected by our Constitution. It is one of a host of rights that I as an American citizen am fortunate to share with Dr. Ellsberg and Dr. Fielding. These rights of the individual cannot be sacrificed to the mere assertion of national security."

In reaching his recognition of this fundamental truth, Egil Krogh has over the last 18 months endured an ordeal of concealment, perjury, resignation from high office, confession, indictment and criminal conviction. In this nightmarish passage from Under Secretary of Transportation to prison inmate, he has experienced a deep disillusionment and undertaken a profound re-examination of his own motives and perspectives.

Mr. Krogh's statement does him credit as a man; he released it last week after hearing sentence from the United States District Court in Washington for his part in planning the office burglary of Daniel Ellsberg's former psychiatrist. Rather than try to shift blame to others or retreat into bitterness, Mr. Krogh not only accepts moral and legal responsibility for his act as head of the secret White House investigative team, the so-called "plumbers," but he also makes clear that he has learned from his mistakes.

When President Nixon personally briefed him on his investigative assignment in July 1971, and urged him to go to great, if unspecified, lengths to discover the source of "news leaks," Mr. Krogh did not stop to ask if what he was embarking on was morally right or even legally justified. Only after the bottom dropped out of his world as a Government official did he grapple with such questions.

Mr. Krogh is one of numerous young men who have found service in the Nixon Administration a disillusioning experience. Several of them have already pleaded guilty to criminal charges and others face possible legal difficulties. It is ironic in the extreme that Mr. Krogh, who mistakenly but sincerely thought he was serving his country in a patriotic fashion, is now about to begin a term of six months in prison while former Vice President Spiro Agnew, an admitted tax evader, is still riding about in a Government limousine and is not only free but protected by Secret Service agents and served by a Government-paid office staff.

Even more dismaying: Mr. Krogh, a loyal subordinate who followed orders, shows in his public statement a clearer understanding of what he did wrong and a firmer willingness to assume moral responsibility than the President who gave the orders. As long as those in the highest places go unpunished and unrepentant, the cautionary tale of Egil Krogh may send, not a valuable warning to the young, but a cynical message to everyone: top dogs get away with it.