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On Political Loyalty

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ESSAY

On March 22, 1973, Richard Nixon was ruminating about political loyalty with John Mitchell. The President was obviously rattled; at one point, he put in a call to the Prime Minister of Canada, but when the call came through he said he didn't want to talk. Disarmed by the knowledge that his closest aides were vulnerable to criminal prosecution, Mr. Nixon rebelled against what seemed to him to be the cold, aloof, selfish behavior of the "Mr. Clean" who had been so important in his life:

"That's what Eisenhower — that's all he cared about," the President expostulated. "Christ—'Be sure he was clean.' Both in the fund thing and the Adams thing."

In the "fund thing" in 1952, when running mate Nixon had been savagely attacked for having a "secret fund," candidate Eisenhower had coolly kept his distance. Nixon never forgave him for insisting that he prove himself "clean as a hound's tooth."

In the Sherman "Adams thing," Vice President Nixon was Mr. Eisenhower's choice to be trigger man. As he gave the President's aide the bad news that he would have to quit, Mr. Nixon privately condemned Eisenhower for abandoning a loyal supporter. (Nixon did not know that Eisenhower later prevailed on President Kennedy to deny an Internal Revenue Service demand to prosecute Mr. Adams for tax evasion, a bipartisan act of political loyalty and compassion now referred to as "obstruction of justice.")

These were the episodes that a most relevant recording shows the President recalled when he was faced with the necessity of casting off his closest aides to protect himself. Loyally, sentimentally, wrongly, he dug in his heels, telling John Mitchell: "We're going to protect our people, if we can."

Mr. Nixon saw himself as having once been the victim of, and later the transmitter of, President Eisenhower's political disloyalty. He would not accept the lesson of his Eisenhower experience: that, at least in public, a political leader must be ruthlessly disloyal to subordinates or supporters who become liabilities.

For a couple of fateful weeks, the President tried to "protect our people," but more on a personal than a principled basis: H. R. Haldeman received the President's loyalty, at enormous cost to Mr. Nixon, while John Mitchell was selected to be the scapegoat, having neglected to properly supervise Jeb Magruder, the agent Mr. Haldeman had chosen to watch Mr. Mitchell.

Mr. Nixon's choice was to be loyal to Bob Haldeman and disloyal to John Mitchell. How each of these loyalists reacted to the President's choice tells

a great deal about political loyalty.

Men are loyal to political leaders for different reasons: Some, like Haldeman, share a belief in a cause or a hatred of a perceived danger, and they want a ticket to the center of the action. Others, like Mitchell, care little for ideology or favor, rooting their loyalty in a need to be needed and a belief in others' estimates of the uniqueness of their qualifications.

What happened to Mr. Mitchell's loyalty after he was selected to be the fall guy, the "big enchilada" to be thrown from the sled to slake the appetites of the pursuing wolves? At first, in his bugged conversation with John Ehrlichman, Mitchell was combative, laying "the whole genesis of this thing" at the White House, and embittered, sneering at what "brother Dick" would do.

But the source of Mitchell's loyalty — as the man who was needed more than ever — was still present, and he did not demand a showdown: "I don't want to embarrass him," he said twice. Although he would not assume the burden of guilt (sometimes political loyalty asks too much), he would "hang tough" and do nothing in his defense to trouble the President. Through televised hearings and a long trial, and despite the release of transcripts that show how he was ill used, Mitchell has held to that code.

And what of Haldeman, the ramrod, the severe judge of the loyalty of others, the recipient of the President's costly loyalty during the three-week period now the focus of concern?

At lunch with a recently convicted loyalist the other day, the surprised comparison was made of the widely differing reactions of Messrs. Mitchell and Haldeman, men in the same legal boat, to the request of the President's lawyer that they testify on Mr. Nixon's behalf before the Judiciary Committee.

Both were asked to exonerate the President on the crucial point of who set in motion the payments to Howard Hunt. Mitchell, at no small risk, came forward, his memory conveniently fuzzy on most matters, but reaching heights of total recall in taking the President out of the payment chain.

That testimony may or may not save the President from a criminal charge, but it was more helpful than Haldeman's reaction, which was to inform the committee that if called, he would exercise his right to remain silent.

Students of loyalty and gratitude could not help but observe that it was the doublecrossed John Mitchell who stood up for Richard Nixon, while the well-counseled H. R. Haldeman stood mute.