

Let's Look at the Record

By William V. Shannon

WASHINGTON, July 19—Defenders of President Nixon repeatedly argue that his enemies are trying to drive him from office for offenses no worse than those committed by one or another of his recent predecessors.

The fundamental answer to this argument is that Mr. Nixon has committed improper and illegal deeds that, so far as is known, no previous President was guilty of. But rather than rehearse the now familiar litany of Watergate, let us consider the more difficult and ambiguous implications of this pro-Nixon argument. Let us compare what he has done in the areas of financial corruption and abuse of Presidential power with the record of his three immediate predecessors, Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson.

President Eisenhower may have inadvertently set Mr. Nixon a bad example during his own White House tenure. General Eisenhower not only golfed and played bridge with rich businessmen but also accepted hundreds of thousands of dollars in expensive gifts from them. Two of them took over the running of his Gettysburg farm and absorbed all of the losses. General Eisenhower, according to a recent biography, even allowed a wealthy acquaintance to pay for his entire civilian wardrobe when he left the Army in 1948.

He also received an enormous though legal tax break before he became President when Internal Revenue agreed to treat the payment for his wartime memoirs as capital gains rather than straight income.

But while in the White House, General Eisenhower did not do any of the things of which Mr. Nixon now stands accused. He did not take dubious and possibly fraudulent deductions in order

to underpay his income taxes, did not convert campaign contributions to his own use, did not charge the taxpayers for improvements to his property.

President Kennedy, born to money, was mostly indifferent to it. If he misused power to his personal advantage, it was in the appointment of his brother as Attorney General, thereby violating a 170-year tradition against Presidential nepotism. Robert Kennedy was an outstanding Attorney General, but no personal merits could justify or offset the damage his appointment did to a highly desirable tradition.

Lyndon Johnson made himself a rich man while in Congress by obtaining radio and television franchises. He also showed through his association with Bobby Baker and others that he knew a good deal about the seamy side of politics. None of this went unnoticed in the press at the time.

Because of his vulnerability on this very issue, the evidence suggests that Mr. Johnson was extremely careful once he became President to make certain that no financial scandals marred his White House record. Partly for that reason, he chose as his successive Attorneys General two men—Nicholas Katzenbach and Ramsey Clark—who had spotless reputations and who had nothing to do with his own past career in politics.

President Johnson would never have called up either of his Attorneys-General and commanded that an antitrust suit be dropped. Mr. Nixon not only made such a reckless intervention in the I.T.T. suit but then compounded that mistake by allowing Richard G. Kleindienst to perjure himself before the Senate Judiciary Committee in order to conceal that Presidential order. I can think of no other President who would have embarked on so dangerous a course of action, and Mr. Nixon did it almost casually.

President Eisenhower used the Central Intelligence Agency to overthrow legal Governments in Iran and Guatemala. President Kennedy used it in an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow the Government of Cuba. These C.I.A. interventions were a stretching of the Presidential power in a way that the Constitution did not contemplate. President Johnson stretched it even further by conducting a sizable war in Vietnam without even getting really adequate legal authority from Congress. Mr. Nixon perpetuated that abuse of authority in Vietnam.

Moreover, he invaded Cambodia without the approval of Congress, later bombed it without even the knowledge of most of Congress; and permitted the bombing to be covered up by the falsification of Air Force records. Is this not comparable to but significantly worse than the Bay of Pigs in its size, duration, and extent of deceit?

President Eisenhower had no interest in wiretapping. Presidents Kennedy and Johnson were aware that the F.B.I. did some domestic wiretapping of dubious legality and did not put a stop to it. But, so far as is known, neither of them did anything remotely comparable to what Mr. Nixon has done in wiretapping and political espionage.

He had the F.B.I. wiretap his own aides, hired two ex-policemen to dig up "dirt" on his political opponents, and set up his own counterintelligence group in the White House to fabricate documents, conduct burglaries and destroy the reputations of private citizens.

Other recent Presidents have made mistakes and sometimes exceeded their authority. But in every kind of mistake and misdeed, Mr. Nixon has surpassed them in degree and sometimes in kind. In the abuse of his office, he stands alone.