

Charles McCabe

## Himself

## Stupidity

THAT a President has resigned, facing certain impeachment and conviction, is still hard to believe. In the end, the episode of Mr. Nixon's fall must remain a puzzle for the titillation of historians, like the character of Adolf Hitler.

There is the enigma of Mr. Nixon's character itself, the strange matter of why he did not destroy the tapes to protect himself in office, and the still unexplained role in all this of his chief aide, Mr. Haldeman, who in some strange way appears to have been calling the shots until the very last.



The record is a fascinating one. The single coherent strain that emerges in my mind is the astonishing stupidity of the political animals who inhabited the White House from 1968 on. These boys were continuously trying to do things, of an evil nature, that they had no need to do at all. Their minds were those of confirmed petty thieves, with a millionaire for a father.

Perhaps the last word on the whole affair may have been said more than a century before Watergate by the French statesman, Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord, Prince of Benevento. Toward the end of his long and unscrupulous public life, Talleyrand wrote to the poet Lamartine:

"What clever man has ever needed to commit a crime? Crime is the last resort of political half-wits."

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AIN'T THAT the truth? There was almost nothing that Mr. Nixon could achieve by criminal acts that he could not have achieved by the exercise of his immense legitimate powers as President. The truth is the man never really knew how powerful he was, how awesome his office. He never transcended himself.

A rich and powerful man, even without the shield of the Presidency to protect him, can do just about whatever he wishes in this world without resorting to crime. The late J. P. Morgan set that tone perfectly when he told his lawyers: "I'm not interested in hearing about law. I want you to fix things so I can do what I want."

Lawyers, before and after, have been astonishingly accommodating in this direction. This, in fact, is their chief function nowadays: Telling rich clients how to evade the law without penalty.

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YET THESE White House lawyers, and they all were lawyers save Haldeman and Ziegler, embarked on a course of petty crime that was totally senseless. The ineptitude of Mr. McGovern, and the plain evidence of the public and private polls, assured Mr. Nixon that he was in, long before the burglary of Larry O'Brien's office was authorized and burked. Likewise, with the Ellsberg psychiatrist break-in.

If the object of these crimes was to humiliate and demean O'Brien and Ellsberg, that certainly could have been done without resorting to crime. To be on the blacklist of a President of the United States is a terrible thing, as more than one man has found out.

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MR. NIXON and his "political half-wits" never realized this. And perhaps it's a good thing, too.

By their stupidity, Mr. Nixon, and Mr. Mitchell, and all the rest of that infamous palace guard, may have saved the Republic from a police state. Mr. Mitchell, as attorney general, was clearly up to the task of putting down all dissent in this country, and enforcing right thinking down to the lowest level of society, with the aid of the cops.

Mr. Nixon, with his astounding majority in the 1972 election, could have rewritten the Bill of Rights. There were those around him, chiefly Mr. Mitchell, who clearly had this intent. Then a D.C. cop stumbled on a blatant example of totally unnecessary White House criminality. In time, despite the lies, the jig was up.