

DURING THE dark days at the Nixon White House, a colorful and controversial figure emerged as one of the President's staunchest defenders. That figure was the Rev. John J. McLaughlin, a Jesuit priest who wore expensive suits, lived at the Watergate and theorized expansively on the subjects of sex and power.

He also defended Nixon's use of profanity as revealed on the Watergate tapes.

But McLaughlin, now leading a relatively private life as a consultant and lecturer in Washington, does not want to get drawn into commenting on either the theology or the language of Jimmy Carter's celebrated comments on lust.

At the same time, McLaughlin expresses strong feelings about the mixing of politics and religion. "It's dynamite. When you set off an explosion, it can have constructive effects, it can clear out debris. But sometimes it can have destructive effects. The thing is you never know."

McLaughlin relinquished his active priesthood when he married last year

after/words

and assumed an "inactive ministry status," meaning he can still perform emergency services such as administering last rites. He has been earning a living by lecturing and consulting with private corporations.

As White House speech writer, McLaughlin says, he did a careful analysis of the speeches of former Presidents and found that the wisest and most successful of them — he includes Kennedy, Franklin Roosevelt and Lincoln — carefully avoided religious and moral issues.

"I think the governor [Carter] is ill-advised to raise the religious-moral dimensions of his campaign because of the off-putting effect that can accrue from that. A President should be concerned with the budget, with national defense and with his constitutional responsibilities."

Having clearly identified himself as a "born-again" Southern Baptist, Carter now risks, McLaughlin believes, alienating his own Southern constituency by moving politically and morally to the left. "The appearance of that [Playboy] interview has destabilized that constituency."