

Nixon Favoritism



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THE LAST of the Watergate investigations, an exhaustive, year-long probe of Richard Nixon's efforts to circumvent the federal merit system, has just been completed.

According to the confidential findings, the Nixon White House set up a political clearance system, which checked the political philosophies and connections of hundreds of applicants for government jobs.

The applications were processed by a special White House Personnel Operation, which was established to tighten the Nixon grip on the federal bureaucracy. The politically favored applicants would be ranked, depending on how influential their backers were.

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THEN THE White House would plant them in key career jobs which, under the law, were supposed to be awarded according to merit. The hiring was arranged through a network of centrally controlled "special referral units," which operated quietly inside government agencies.

Even more shocking, top officials of the Civil Service Commission condoned and even participated in the political manipulations. They not only were aware of the illegal patronage system but used it themselves. Yet they are responsible for safeguarding the merit system.

These startling findings, perhaps the last echo of the Watergate years, are contained in a report by the House

Subcommittee on Manpower and Civil Service. The painstaking study, which hasn't yet been released to the public, outlined how the Nixon administration tried to restore the discredited political spoils system, which was abolished 94 years ago.

According to the study, political favoritism in the civil service system reached a peak during the Nixon years, 1969 through 1973. Here's how it worked:

Patronage units were set up within each federal agency to find positions for individuals who were given a "preferred" status by the White House Personnel Operation.

The applications had to be forwarded to the Civil Service Commission, of course, for approval. But top CSC officials, instead of policing the illegal preferential hiring, aided and abetted it.

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AS AN EXAMPLE of how the patronage system operated, the study cites the General Services Administration, which hired more than 300 employees through the patronage system.

One GSA official said he was directed to hire the sons of two former Nixon cohorts, ex-Attorney General Richard Kleindienst and ex-budget Director George Shultz.

Yet six weeks earlier, the GSA had dropped a custodial laborer with nine children from the payroll, because there was no money to pay his salary.