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Obama and Nixon: A Historical Perspective



By Robert F. Kennedy Jr. - May 20, 2013

For once with good reason, the GOP is exorcised with the scandals involving the IRS targeting political groups and the FBI's spying on A.P. reporters. The broader public is legitimately concerned. However, in its classic overblown breathlessness at all things Obama, the gleeful Republican leadership is already calling for impeachment and dragging out desperate comparisons to Nixon's Watergate. This, despite caveats from its own sages not to overplay Republican good fortune. "We overreached in 1998," Newt Gingrich admitted recently. He counseled restraint to the Tea Party jihadists he helped spawn. Gingrich recalled how the GOP's scandal mongering against Clinton had only amplified Clinton's popularity and cost Republicans the 1998 mid-terms and Gingrich his speakership. But this new generation of hysterical House members immune to that wisdom, are headed straight for the feinting couch in fits of anti-Obama hysteria.

In a characteristic spasm of partisan apoplexy, Iowa Congressman Steve King offered a shrill algorithm: "add Watergate and Iran Contra together and multiply by ten" to calculate the tyrannical evil of the Obama scandals.

As usual, the Fox-fueled GOP narrative swayed the mainstream press. On May 16, Reuters' Jeff Mason interrupted Obama's press conference with Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan to ask the President, "How do you feel about the comparisons by some of your critics with the scandals of the Nixon Administration?" Obama responded with calm contempt; he would leave those comparisons to the journalists. But he urged Mason to "read some history." If Mason takes that advice, here are some of the historical tidbits he might consider.

President Richard Nixon was aware that the IRS had audited him in 1961 and 1962 and presumed those audits were politically motivated by the Kennedy White House. When, early in

his Administration, Nixon learned that his friends and political allies John Wayne and Rev. Billy Graham had endured recent audits by his own IRS, Nixon boiled over. He ordered White House Chief of Staff Bob Haldeman, "Get the word out, down to the IRS that I want them to conduct field audits on those who are our opponents." Perhaps recalling the Kennedy era audits, Nixon ordered that its investigator begin with my Uncle's, John F. Kennedy's, former campaign manager and White House aide, then Democratic Committee Chairman, Lawrence O'Brien.

Nixon's minions had the IRS set up a special internal arm "the Activist Organization Committee" in July of 1969 to audit an "enemies list" provided by Nixon. My uncle Senator Ted Kennedy was at the top of that list along with a small army of well-known journalists. The IRS later renamed its political audit squad "Special Services" or "SS" to keep its mission secret. The SS targeted over 1,000 liberal groups for audits and 4,000 individuals. The SS staff managed their files in a soundproof cell in the IRS basement.

On September 27, 1970, Nixon ordered Haldeman to get the IRS to investigate my Uncle Ted who was then the presumed frontrunner in the 1972 presidential contest, sharing the field with Edmond Muskie and Hubert Humphrey who Nixon also ordered audited.

Nixon personally put White House dirty trickster Tom Charles Huston, former president of the Young Americans for Freedom, in charge of setting up the new IRS "anti-radical squad" to make sure that the laggards in IRS's bureaucracy didn't drop the ball. Huston prepared a 43-page blueprint for Nixon outlining a government agency campaign targeting Nixon's enemies. Uncle Teddy was still at the top. The scheme included tapping phones without warrants, infiltrating organizations that had been critical of the President and, purging IRS agents who refused to tow the Republican line. Huston told the President, "we won't be in control of the government and in a position of effective leverage until such time or we have complete and total control of the top three slots" at the IRS. Nixon also enthusiastically authorized a series of "black bag jobs" including breaking into offices, homes and liberal think tanks like the Ford Foundation and the Brookings Institute which Nixon believed was home to many former Kennedy Administration officials.

As a disclaimer, Huston cautioned that the "use of this technique is clearly illegal; it amounts to burglary. It is also highly risky and could result in great embarrassment if exposed. However, it is also the most fruitful tool and can produce the kind of intelligence which cannot be obtained in any other fashion."

According to historian and Nixon biographer, Rick Perlstein, Nixon "found the document splendid." Haldeman ordered Huston to draft a formal decision memo outlining the illegal plan as a mandate to the heads of the intelligence and tax collecting agencies. Nixon ordered Haldeman and Huston to order the IRS, the FBI and the CIA to proceed with the plan.

In May 1971, Nixon used an IRS investigation of Alabama Governor George Wallace's brother, Gerald Wallace, to pressure Gov. Wallace to run for President on the Democratic ticket as a spoiler rather than on a third party ticket as he planned. The blackmail scheme succeeded and most of Wallace's white male supporters fled to the Republicans after the Democrats

nominated civil rights activist George McGovern. Nixon's tactic of having Wallace run as a Democrat was an indispensable element of the White House's "southern strategy".

Four months later, on September 8, 1971, Nixon raged at his counsel and Chief Domestic Policy Advisor, John Ehrlichman, about the IRS's lack of progress on finding dirt on his enemies. "We have the power but are we using it to investigate contributors to Hubert Humphrey, to Muskie, and the Jews? You know they are stealing everybody.... you know they really tried to crucify Ho Lewis [Reader's Digest editor, Hobart Lewis, a Nixon supporter who had been audited]! Are we looking into Muskie's return? Hubert's? Hubert's been in a lot of funny deals. Teddy? Who knows about the Kennedys? Shouldn't they be investigated?"

The following week he pleaded with Haldeman to light a fire under the IRS. "Bob, please get me the names of the Jews, you know the Big Jewish contributors of the Democrats.... Could we please investigate those cocksuckers?"

The following day he replayed that tune for Ehrlichman. "You see the IRS is full of Jews that's the reason they went after Graham." Haldeman recounted in his diary, "There was a considerable discussion of the terrible problem arising from the total Jewish domination of the media. Graham has the strong feeling that the Bible says there are Satanic Jews and that's where our problem arises."

The "Jewish-controlled media" and the "liberal media" were never far from Nixon's limbic system. Nixon also bugged reporters and used bribery, blackmail attempts, forgery, spying, burglary, and extensive bugging by national police agencies and by his own "plumbers squad" to monitor and manipulate the press for political purposes. Many of the top twenty names on Nixon's political enemies list (which eventually included 47,000 Americans) were reporters. They included Daniel Schorr, Mary McGrory, Edwin Guthman and Walter Cronkite. Nixon's staff and agencies bugged their phones, investigated their sex lives, rifled their trash, and had them watched and followed. Nixon directly ordered the investigation of imagined homosexuality by columnist Jack Anderson, a devout, teetotaling Mormon with a happy marriage and nine children.

On March 24, 1972, a group of Nixon's trusted operatives including former CIA spy E. Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy, a murderous former Dutchess county, New York prosecutor and Adolf Hitler admirer, huddled in the basement of Washington's plush Hay-Adams Hotel, across from the White House with Dr. Edward Gund, a CIA physician, poison and assassinations expert. Nixon had complained darkly to top staffers including Special Counsel Chuck Colson that Anderson was "a thorn in his side" and that "we have to do something about this son of a bitch." According to Hunt and Liddy, Colson deployed them that day saying that Nixon had ordered Colson to "Stop Anderson at all costs."

The three spooks plotted out the best way to murder Anderson including running him off the road, spiking his drink with venom, breaking into his home and lacing Anderson's aspirin bottle ("aspirin roulette") with a special toxicant undetectable by autopsy or simply shooting him with Liddy's untraceable 9mm pistol. The plot is detailed by Mark Felstein in his 2005 book,

Poisoning the Press, and elsewhere. Liddy suggested painting Anderson's steering wheel with a massive dose of LSD which would cause Anderson to crash in a hallucinogenic craze. Dr. Gund warned them that the LSD would be traceable in an autopsy. They finally elected to stab Anderson outside his house. Liddy volunteered to do the bloody work and make the crime look like a bungled robbery. Luckily for Anderson, the plot fizzled and was forgotten when both conspirators were arrested shortly thereafter in the Watergate scandal while endeavoring to reset a bug in Larry O'Brien's office.

On October 6, 1971, Nixon ordered Haldeman to have the IRS audit Los Angeles Times publisher Otis Chandler who had transformed the Times from a right wing rag into a universally respected paper by recruiting top journalists from across the nation. Chandler and his very large family were close friends of my family and had spent the summer prior to my father's death running the Colorado River with us. "I want Otis Chandler's income tax," Nixon told Haldeman. Nixon then called his Attorney General and former law partner, John Mitchel, and ordered Mitchel to fire the Los Angeles Director of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. "The fellow out there in the Immigration Services is a kike by the name of Rosenberg." The President explained to Mitchel, "He is to be out." Fulminating on, Nixon told Mitchel, "I want you to direct the most trusted person you have in the Immigration Service to look at all the activities of the Los Angeles Times... let me explain as a Californian, I know everybody in California hires them... Otis Chandler... I want him checked with regard to his gardener. I understand he is a wetback. Is that clear?" When the Attorney General replied, "Yes, sir." Nixon crowed triumphantly, "We're going after the Chandlers! Every one, individually and collectively, their income taxes... every one of those sons of bitches."

In August of 1972, Edmund Muskie withdrew as George McGovern's Vice Presidential running mate. After my Uncle Ted demurred at McGovern's request that he join the ticket, McGovern recruited another of my uncles, Sargent Shriver. On August 9, Nixon had a meeting with his staff to discuss how to destroy the Democrats. Turning to Haldeman, he asked, "What in the name in of God are we doing on this one? What are we doing about the financial contributors? Now those lists there... are we looking over the financial contributions to the Democratic Committee? Are we running their income tax returns? Is the Justice Department checking to see if there are any anti-trust suits? We have all this power and were not using it. Now what the Christ is the matter? In other words I'm just thinking for example if there is information on Larry O'Brien. What is being done? Who is doing this full-time? What in the name of God are we doing?" Nixon abruptly narrowed his sights on McGovern's top contributor, Henry Kimmelman, and said emphatically, "Scare the shit out of him," He repeated the order to Ehrlichman, "Scare the shit out of him. Now there are some Jews with the mafia and they are involved with this too!"

George Schultz was now Treasury Secretary. Nixon directed Haldeman to order Schultz to audit Kimmelman. "Everybody thinks George is an honest, decent man," Nixon observed contemptuously. "George has got a fantasy... what's he trying to do say? That you can't play politics with the IRS? Just tell George he should do it." Three days later Nixon had Kimmelman's tax returns as well Larry O'Brien's who had by then agreed to manage McGovern's faltering campaign and whose office would be the target of the Watergate break-in.

On March 12, 1973, even with the erupting Watergate scandal and its related Congressional investigations incinerating his presidency, Nixon was still intent on using the IRS to disable his enemies. That day he asked Haldeman, "What happened to the suggestion that the IRS run audits on all the members of Congress?"

Those who bother to read these historical snippets will find many important departures and only tenuous parallels between the Obama Administration's IRS affair and Richard Nixon's Watergate-era IRS scandal. A principal distinction is the ingredient of direct presidential involvement. President Nixon was the fulcrum, the visionary and the principal conspirator in his various capers to use the IRS as a political weapon. Nixon personally directed and persistently harangued his staff to audit, investigate and gather dirt on his enemies for personal purposes. Nixon went to reckless extremes even punishing IRS agents who refused to participate in his vendetta. A mean-spirited viciousness and his contagious enthusiasm for law breaking were also distinctive Nixon bailiwicks. In contrast, there is no evidence that Obama even knew of the IRS investigations which were presided over by Donald Shulman, a Bush appointee. The most recent evidence indicate that the Tea Party audits resulted not from intentional political targeting of conservatives from the sheer preponderous of Tea Party applications among the hundreds of 501(c)(4) tax exemption requests that deluged a tiny understaffed IRS field office. The 200 demoralized officials, already drowning in tax exemption petitions, also audited several liberal groups including Progress Texas and Sea Shepard. Detailed reporting in Sunday's New York Times indicates that the problem arose because the Cleveland branch is already debilitated and overwhelmed by years of personnel and budget cuts, now aggravated by the sequestration -- and confused by new rules applying to the cascade of political "charities" unleashed by the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision. The GOP's comparisons of today's IRS blunders to the Watergate era scandals broadcast a willful blindness toward history.

As to the A.P. eavesdropping scandal, any spying directed at journalists should set off fire alarms in a democracy. The Associated Press is justified in its outrage at the Justice Department caper. Fear that a reporter's phone may be bugged will inhibit disclosures and discussions with the many secret sources and whistleblowers upon whom journalists rely to keep our democracy transparent and our public informed.

Obama's Justice Department's eavesdropping on the Associated Press, however, is in no way analogous to Nixon era bugging. The Obama eavesdropping was an, unfortunately, legal investigation of national security leaks involving a Nigerian terrorist bomber planning to blow up an American airliner en route from Amsterdam to New York. Nixon's bugging in contrast was illegal and his purposes were political and personal having little or nothing to do with national security.

Many states have "journalist shield" laws that make eavesdropping on reporters illegal and give a limited, but critical privilege to the relationship between journalists and their sources. Obama has long promised to support federal shield legislation. This week, apparently motivated by damage control, he finally asked Senate leaders to produce a federal shield law, a reform that could transform this scandal into a national plus for American democracy. That legislation will require GOP support. Republicans could also work with the White House to find adequate

funding and training for the IRS and remedy the morale and governance problems in Cleveland. The big question now, is whether Republicans will sideline genuine reform in their efforts to exploit the "scandal". Republican legislators have apparently been ordered by their leadership to hold scandal-mongering hearings but to stall any legislation for genuine reform. The real scandal is the Republican party's devotion to grandstanding over governance and its preference for slime over substance.
