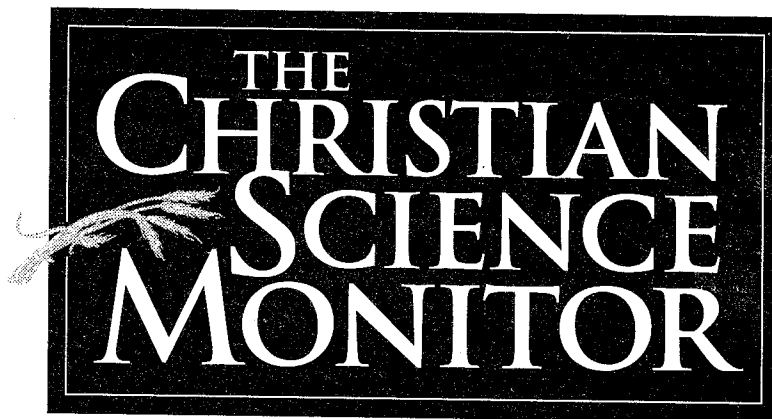


*'To injure no man,
but to bless all mankind'*

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OPINION

Memo to Bush White House staff

Advice on integrity from a Nixon 'plumber'

By Egil (Bud) Krogh

SEATTLE

LAST month, I watched you on television as you raised your right hands and took the oath of office as members of the White House staff. I was moved to write this letter explaining how integrity is key to your safety and success.

Some ideas about integrity have recently jelled for me that I wish I had understood better 32 years ago when I raised my right hand, took my oath, and set sail on Richard Nixon's ship of state as a member of his crew.

This idea of integrity is incorporated in the commissions appointing you to your positions. You will soon receive yours, beautifully framed, from the White House framing shop. Read them carefully. Most commissions state this: "Reposing special trust in the integrity ... of [your name]," the president appoints you to your position. "Special trust in [your] integrity" is the fundamental idea.

I joined Mr. Nixon's staff as a junior lawyer in the White House Counsel's office. My first assignment was to advise nominees to the White House staff on ethical standards and conflict-of-interest laws. For the overwhelming part, Nixon's staff adhered to these standards and served the country honorably. But midway through Nixon's first term, some of us displayed a horrendous breakdown in integrity that contributed to the eventual sinking of his ship.

My participation in this integrity breakdown happened in response to the release to The New York Times of the Pentagon Papers, a top-secret history of the Vietnam War, by one of its authors, Daniel Ellsberg. In the tense atmosphere of the White House, where we were daily preoccupied with the Vietnam War, growing dissent to the government's policies, and nuclear-arms talks with the Soviet Union, this release hit the staff like a bomb and suggested an act of treason. In response to what the president called an extremely grave situation, he set up a special White House unit to investigate the release. White House counsel John Ehrlichman appointed me co-director.

The investigations unit, called the "plumbers," planned and executed a break-in into the office of Lewis Fielding, Dr. Ellsberg's psychiatrist. We were looking for any information in Dr. Fielding's files that could be used to discredit Ellsberg - in particular, anything that would show an intelligence link between him and the USSR.

Somehow, at that time, we were able to convince ourselves that national security justified what we did. Nothing was found

during the break-in.

I now know that my direction of the break-in represented a massive breakdown in integrity. In particular, this decision failed the two tests of what integrity requires, affirmative answers to these questions:

Is it whole and complete?
Is it right?

Is it whole and complete?

The first question relates to whether what you are designing can fully accomplish its purpose. We speak of a ship having watertight integrity or even integrity in a work of art. In each case, the

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idea of wholeness suggests nothing essential is left out.

As you prepare policy options, ask yourself these questions: "Have I thought this through?" "Have I left out any critical items in my analysis?" "Have I considered the second-, third-, and fourth-order consequences of my recommendations?" (This was one of the questions Pat Moynihan kept pressing young staffers to ask when he served on Nixon's

staff.) "Will my advice help the president make a sound, balanced judgment on this issue?"

While it seems obvious, it is also crucial to ask, "Is it legal?" White House lawyers need to ask this question a lot and be able to answer it affirmatively. In formulating your answers, I recommend you use interpretations of the law that are well established in statute and precedent, and do not rely on hazy, loose definitions of what you think words like "national security," "commander in chief," "trust fund," and the like might be tortured into meaning. It will help you lawyers, too, to be constantly vigilant to any violation of the Bill of Rights.

You must wholly and completely comply with the letter and spirit of White House ethical rules. In response to the many offers of gifts you'll receive, there's one rule: "Just say no." Accept nothing of more than nominal value that is being offered even remotely because of your position. No rides on corporate jets. No vicuna coats. No pets for your children, especially cocker spaniels. Avoid any whiff of a conflict of interest. Remember, "special trust" is being placed in your integrity.

If the plumbers had seriously asked, "Have I thought this through?" or "What are the consequences for the president and the country if this covert action is

uncovered?" or "Is it legal?" the answers would at the very least have prompted second thoughts and, one hopes, a different result.

Is it right?

The second question relates to the more commonly accepted definition of integrity in its moral

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sense. This idea of rightness relates to truth, justice, honesty, honor, fairness, trustworthiness, and humanity.

If you haven't already discovered this, you will find out that there is enormous pressure on the White House staff to get results. And you will experience pressure to go along unhesitatingly with your colleagues, in a collective "group think." Results-oriented, group-think mental states do not encourage taking time to reflect on whether an action is right.

But you must.

When I wrote my statement to the court before being sentenced to prison in 1974 for violating Fielding's rights, I pointed out to

Judge Gerhard Gesell that not once during the deliberations of the plumbers did we ask the question, "Is it right?" We asked all the operational questions, such as, "Who can do this?" and "Can we avoid having it traced to the White House?" But we didn't ask, "Is it right?"

We just assumed we were right because the president was pressing for action and we were working in the White House on his behalf. Assumptions are not sufficient.

You cannot imagine the shame I felt in August 1974, shortly after I was released from prison after 4-1/2 months and Nixon had just resigned, when I visited Fielding in Beverly Hills to ask forgiveness for what we had done. We had stripped this kind, good man of his right to privacy without a second thought.

Of equal pain was my visit the next day to Nixon in his San Clemente office, where I told him how deeply I regretted my role in the sinking of his presidency.

So there you have it. If you can answer "yes" to those two key questions, not only will your work probably "play in Peoria," but you will also avoid being abandoned by your colleagues to twist slowly in the wind.

Most important, your president and country will be well served, and your fellow citizens will be grateful. Bon voyage.

■ *Egil (Bud) Krogh, former deputy counsel to President Nixon, practices energy law in Seattle.*