



BY PETER GOETTLER

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

The More Things Change . . .

In the week I'm writing this, a new book is being released by Bob Woodward based on hours of interviews with Alexander Butterfield and boxes of files that Butterfield took with him when he left the Nixon White House in 1973. Butterfield, you may recall, was the deputy to Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman, who, in testimony to the Senate Watergate Committee, divulged the existence of Nixon's Oval Office taping system. Although Nixon would not resign for another 13 months, the president's fate was sealed.

I'll admit I can't get enough of these Watergate books. Part of it might be nostalgia for the events of my childhood, along with the complexity and intrigue of the affair. But a big reason, of course, is the lesson it provides about the abuse of government power. Whether it's sending young Americans into harm's way without compelling national security reasons, wholesale spying on U.S. citizens, mass incarceration and police misconduct, abrogation of property rights, burdensome regulation, or confiscatory taxation—government power is frightening. And this power is of particular concern when it's misused by government officials for their own political ends.

One might think more than enough books have been written about Watergate. But over the years, new ones have brought fresh understanding of the deeply corrupt nature of the Nixon administration and the scale of its abuse of power. I like to think that the blanket misuse of power or disregard for the rule of law elicits its condemnation from across the political spectrum, serving to strongly discourage such misconduct. But the vast proliferation of "—gates" in the decades since Nixon tells us this is wishful thinking, as does the fact that censure of such misconduct is often heavily skewed along partisan lines.

The Internal Revenue Service scandal that came to light in 2013 is a chilling example of abuse that should concern everyone. Americans know the formidable power of the IRS. We make jokes about how our own behavior or political and advocacy activity as individuals might earn us investigations or audits. In fact this is gallows humor, reflecting our recognition of how such power might be abused and how outrageous it would be if it were. But the current scandal, along with the misuse of IRS audits under Nixon and other presidents, shows that the temptation to turn this power against enemies or opponents is difficult for politicians to resist.

The IRS's behavior here is audacious. First, it discriminated in the approval of organizations' tax-exempt

status based upon their ideology. Second, the agency claimed that subpoenaed emails were lost due to the crash and subsequent destruction of key employee Lois Lerner's hard drive, followed by the revelation that five other IRS employees subject to congressional investigation also lost their emails in "computer crashes." Third, it was subsequently revealed that backup tapes containing 24,000 Lerner emails were destroyed—despite outstanding preservation orders and subpoenas for the emails. And finally, many of us have been struck by the arrogance and high-handedness—and possibly untruthfulness—of IRS commissioner John Koskinen's testimony on these matters.

This scandal is contemptible and ought to enrage all Americans. It appeared to get a lot of attention when it initially broke. (Google the phrase "IRS scandal" and you'll get about 2.5 million hits. That's a lot, although Googling the words "Donald Trump hair" yielded me 50 million hits.) But media interest seemed to wane quickly, particularly regarding the lost emails. George Will has recently called for the impeachment of Commissioner Koskinen, primarily as a way to "test the mainstream media's ability to continue ignoring this five-year-old scandal." And although I always fear the unintended consequences of such impulses, perhaps impeachment of executive branch officials should be considered more widely as a tactic to help bring our fourth branch of government—an out-of-control administrative state—to heel.

One of our goals as libertarians—and a key objective of Cato's work—is to substantially reduce the power of government. There are many reasons for this, but important among them is so that such power may not be turned on us in unjust ways. We thank all of you who, through your generosity, make this work possible. And, speaking of taxes, a byproduct of government's cost is the tax planning in which many of us engage in these waning months of the year. To the extent your own planning includes charitable contributions, please let your favorite pro-liberty think tank figure prominently in them. It has been a great year for me, personally, getting to know Cato's generous and passionate Sponsors. We are so grateful for your dedication to liberty and for the generous sharing of your hard-earned resources that makes Cato's important role in the battle for freedom possible.

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