

Watergate Was Peanuts

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Books of The Times

By JOHN LEONARD

AGENCY OF FEAR. By Edward Jay Epstein. 352 pages. G.P. Putnam's, \$9.95.

It seems that when Richard and all the little Nixons sat down in the White House in January 1969 to figure out how to stop crime in time for the 1972 re-election campaign, they had to be reminded by Attorney General John N. Mitchell to hold their rhetorical horses. The Federal Government, Mr. Mitchell pointed out, simply hadn't the powers or the jurisdiction to do much about the kinds of crime—homicide, assault, mugging, robbery and burglary—that worried most Americans.

This was a major inconvenience. And so it became necessary to invent the great heroin menace in order to have something for the Government to declare war on.

For a war on heroin involving half a dozen agencies of the Federal Government to make sense, certain assumptions had to be true. These assumptions included: (1) Addicts were responsible for most street crime, to feed their escalating habits; (2) Addiction itself was increasing dramatically; (3) Stop heroin traffic, and the statistics on crime would look a lot better; (4) Anything was permissible—breaking and entering, wiretapping, Internal Revenue Service harassment, messing up American foreign policy, even assassination—if it could be seen to help the cause.

Wrong Assumptions

None of these assumptions was true. Addicts are responsible for only a small fraction of street crime. Addiction was actually decreasing in the late 1960's. When heroin is unavailable, addicts switch to some other drugs; criminal business goes on as usual. And the laws of the nation weren't made to be broken by Presidents because of campaign promises.

Nevertheless, the war went forward, to exactly no effect. It ranged from I.R.S. audits of suspected traffickers, thereby freezing their assets and making possible "jeopardy" judgments without a trial, to the "no-knock" nighttime invasions of the homes of innocent citizens in Collinsville, Ill. It obliged Turkey to stop planting poppies, thus opening up the market for Indian and Southeast Asian opium. It even employed a "sniffer" to smell out heroin "labs" in France. Listen:

"Dr. Piret worked out the anticipated wind plumes and the frequency of the fumes. Then, in 1971, the sniffer, concealed in a brand-new Volkswagen camper with a snorkel mounted on its roof, rolled into Marseille. An American agent drove this not entirely inconspicuous sniffer through the streets, while another agent inside charted all the beep signals on a street map. Unfortunately, the signals given out by the acetic acid being sought were indistinguishable from the odor frequency of salad." They detected all the restaurants in Marseille.

But Edward Jay Epstein is up to more than writing a book on mistaken assumptions. Mr. Epstein—whose other books include "Inquest" (on the Warren Commission) and "News From Nowhere" (on television coverage of the Vietnam War)—is writing about an attempted coup d'état. He describes in flabbergasting detail a White House that sought to create a national police



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legal powers borrowed from other Government agencies, serving only the will of the President, free from checks and balances of Congressional oversight.

It worked like this: Whether because of scruples or simply to protect their bureaucratic perks, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Central Intelligence Agency, Treasury Department, Customs and the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs weren't cooperating with the Nixon Administration as the Administration thought they should. So the Administration decided to concoct a Drug Enforcement Agency consisting of operatives press-ganged from all of these departments and reporting to the White House staff. Such an agency, a sort of metastasized Plumbers, would police whatever delinquency annoyed the President.

Familiar Names

It is not perhaps surprising that many of the people involved in this effort—John D. Ehrlichman, Egil Krogh Jr., E. Howard Hunt, G. Gordon Liddy, Robert Mardian and John Dean—were also implicated in the Watergate break-in and coverup, and the raid on the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist. What is surprising is that they might have gotten away with everything if the various threatened bureaucracies hadn't leaked the various unsavory secrets to the press. There were dozens of Deep Throats, most of them Government employees. Watergate was peanuts, but the elephant choked on the peanut.

Mr. Epstein tells all: the manipulation of the news organizations to create a climate of fear about drugs; the manipulation of the same organizations to make sure Watergate would be understood; the bureaucratic bloodletting; the disastrous methadone program; Operation Intercept; how J. Edgar Hoover went about blackmailing Presidents; and—of extraordinary importance—how he, Mr. Epstein, went about gathering his information and arriving at his conclusions. Every source is named, every speculation labeled as such, every deduction documented.

For Mr. Epstein is writing at least two books. One is for political scientists and concerned citizens. The other is for journalists, and those of us who want to understand journalism—sources, leaks, inferences, special pleading, deadline pressure, using and being used. There are 73 pages of notes appended to "Agency of Fear," and they are just as compelling as the rest of