

Another Watergate Horror Story

Reviewed by
Harry Kelly

The reviewer is a former investigative reporter for The Chicago Tribune.

Watergate has become the 1001 Nights of our time, providing an endless supply of stories—scary, suspenseful, bizarre and even funny—and this book has some of each. The trouble is, it doesn't tell them very well.

Many of those who followed every little step of Watergate, and the disclosures about the CIA and the FBI, concluded that if there was that much dark stuff going on, there probably was more, maybe as bad as what had been revealed. And why not? Some agencies confessed only what they had to; some had so little control that they didn't know all that went on; and some agencies were never investigated.

Epstein's contribution to the Watergate revelations, based partly on the papers of Egil Krogh, the manager of the Plumbers, is that the Nixon White House (Krogh, Gordon Liddy, et al) intended to establish a secret police network under guise of the "war on heroin," combining federal, state and local police.

One of the best restraints on abuse of power is the good old-fashioned leak, and Epstein notes that a President may gain complete control of all parts of government only by destroying the system of leaks which would disclose the abuses and scandals. And by so doing he could twist the balance of power and achieve something "tantamount to an America *coup d'etat*." This the author defines as a seizure of power within the system, more slippery than a putsch.

By Epstein's account, it was simple enough at the beginning. Nixon created by executive order, without congressional review, the Office of Drug Abuse Law Enforcement and the Office of National Narcotics Intelligence and put both under ambitious men. It was hoped, Epstein writes, that they would provide Nixon with the where-withal and personnel "to assume the functions of 'the Plumbers' on a far grander scale." But this theme, which becomes only a tease as chapters unfold, is never satisfactorily developed.

Epstein, sadly, never heard of the old city editor's advice that "too

many facts spoil a story." Like many other investigative reporters who labor hours to dislodge a fact, Epstein doesn't have the heart to cut it out when it only serves to blur the focus. And like many other investigative reporters, he views the simple sentence as something to be decorated with "even though," "not only" and "althoughs."

But he has done a lot of serious digging. He has turned up episodes that should give worriers more to worry about; he relates some misadventures that would be laughable if they weren't sad, and provides collectors of cynicism with blue-ribbon examples.

There is the case of Arthur Watson, former chairman of the IBM World Trade Corporation. When Watson became ambassador to France, Nixon told him that his first job was to clean up the heroin problem in France.

Taking his assignment to heart, Watson had the embassy's scientific attaché develop a device to smell out acetic acid, used in heroin processing, and dispatched it in a Volkswagen through Marseilles to detect the labs. But after looking at the map, Watson discovered it was detecting all the restaurants in town. The embassy's marvelous "sniffer" couldn't distinguish between acetic acid and salad dressing.

There is the double-dip cynicism of bureaucrats hyping the drug problem's dimensions—the statistics of use—in order to enlarge their empires and appropriations and the Nixon administration officials who knew they were doing it and let them because it suited their purposes.

There is the classic story of Krogh's frightening naiveté. In a meeting at the White House, Nixon told Krogh to stop crime in the District of Columbia. So Krogh called Mayor Walter Washington and, in Krogh's words, "asked him to stop crime, and he paused for a moment and said, 'Okay,' and that was about it."

And there is the plan for "clandestine law enforcement," which according to some of Epstein's sources, included assassination of major foreign drug traffickers who were protected by the local police. According to a Krogh memo, Nixon agreed to spending \$100 million for the "clandestine law enforcement." Epstein acknowl-

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AGENCY OF FEAR: Opiates and Political Power in America.

By Edward Jay Epstein

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edges that what happened to the \$100 million isn't clear. It isn't even clear if \$100 million was appropriated.

Epstein is still able to invoke a little shiver, not only by documenting the dangerous foolishness and lies of some of those who were supposed to protect us, but for his vision of what might have been.

He concludes that if it hadn't been for Watergate, the super Drug Enforcement Agency, created toward the end of the Nixon administration, with authority for wiretaps and no-knock warrants and a contingent of former CIA agents, "might have served as the strong investigative arm for domestic surveillance that President Nixon had long quested after."

And that some other President might quest after again.