

Watergate: The Phony-Tough Meet the Crazy-Brave

The second round of the Watergate hearings will begin in a few days. Perhaps this time the senators will find the answer to the great unanswered question of the whole sordid business: How could people who were clearly not morons have been such goddam fools?

The Nixon men who testified in the first round said a good many inherently unbelievable things, and often said them in a semiliterate way, but they seemed to have respectable intelligence quotients. Yet these people risked the ruin of the Nixon presidency, which has now occurred, in order to bug Larry O'Brien's office, from which absolutely nothing was to be gained. Why?

I have come up with a theory to answer that question, which I herewith offer with due modesty. My theory derives from the peculiar relationship between two minority categories of the

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human race—the crazy-brave and the phony-tough. Most people who have been in a war, and a lot of people who haven't, have come across specimens of both breeds.

The crazy-brave, who are a lot rarer than the phony-tough, are always doing crazy things that ought to get them killed, or at least maimed, but nothing ever seems to happen to them. They also exercise a kind of hex or double whammy on the phony-tough, and they keep getting the phony-tough into terrible trouble.

What came out with awful clarity in the first round of Watergate hearings was that almost all the Nixon men were classical phony-toughs. The phony-toughs are easily identifiable by their manner of speech.

The Watergate testimony abounds with examples of phony-tough talk. John Dean's memorandum on how to "screw our enemies"; Chuck Colson's memorandum on how he would "walk over my grandmother" to re-elect Nixon and his suggestion that someone (not Colson) blow up the Brookings Institution; John Mitchell's various vulgarisms, and his "when the going

gets tough, the tough get going"; John Ehrlichman's proposal for poor Pat Gray, to "let him hang there, let him twist slowly, slowly in the wind"; and many more.

Phony-tough talk always shares the same basic characteristic—it is talk designed to show the toughness of the talker, but requiring no painful or dangerous action on his part. This is why the crazy-brave have a hex on the phony-tough—the crazy-brave challenge the phony-tough to translate tough talk into dangerous action.

Enter G. Gordon Liddy. Liddy is the archetype of the crazy-brave. In the testimony of Jeb Stuart Magruder, there is a nice example of the relationship between the crazy-brave and the phony-tough. Magruder, who has been trying to work up the courage to fire Liddy, meets him in a hallway:

"Magruder: . . . I simply put my hand on Mr. Liddy's shoulder and he asked me to remove it and indicated that if I did not serious consequences would occur.

"Dash: Was he more specific than serious consequences?"

"Magruder: Well, he indicated he would kill me . . ."

The phony-toughs in the Nixon entourage were uneasily aware that Liddy often carried a gun and was quite capable of using it. Magruder told how Liddy, spying out McGovern's headquarters in the dead of night, pulled a pistol and shot out a light. When they heard about this, Magruder says, "Both Mr. Strachan and I became very concerned." Spying is fine. But no loud bangs, please.

On another occasion, Magruder was complaining in Liddy's presence about some "enemy" and muttered something about "getting rid" of him. A few minutes later, a Magruder subordinate met a grim-faced Liddy, who mentioned the well-known name of the "enemy" and remarked that "I have been ordered to kill him." A horrified Magruder finally persuaded Liddy that murder was not quite what he had in mind.

John Dean testified about a chance chat with Liddy after the break-in had been discovered: "Liddy was very apologetic for the fact that they had been caught . . . He also told me that he was a soldier and would never talk. He said that if anyone wished to shoot him on the street he was ready." One can imagine how this notion must have astonished a phony-tough like John Dean who, far from being ready to be shot, was ready instead to squeal on all his former friends and colleagues in the hope of escaping jail.

It is clear from the testimony and other evidence that the Nixonian phony-toughs were scared sick of the crazy-brave Liddy, and kept trying to get rid of him. He kept getting tossed around like a hot potato from the

Treasury Department to the White House to the Committee for the Re-Election of the President to the Finance Committee, but no one had quite the guts to fire him.

No one—according to my theory—had quite the guts, either, to tell him to his face to forget his wild schemes for doing in the Democrats. His first and most memorable scheme, to cost a mere million dollars, involved such modest proposals as mass kidnappings and launching a floating whorehouse at Miami Beach to entice the Democrats into whispered indiscretions.

This scheme, it appears, was fairly firmly squelched by John Mitchell. So a frustrated Liddy had to cut back his dream schemes, first to a half-million-dollar operation, finally to a mere quarter million. This third, chicken-

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feed scheme would allow only for begging the Democratic National Committee and the headquarters of the chief presidential contenders at Miami Beach.

This is the scheme that ruined the Nixon presidency, and there is a lot of conflicting testimony about whether Mitchell or anyone else approved or disapproved it. My theory is that nobody did either—that, not being morons, none of the phony-toughs in the Nixon high command gave Liddy an unequivocal green light, but that none of them had the guts to tell Liddy to can it, or to deny him the money for the operation when he asked for it.

If this theory is correct, the President was the victim of the hex the crazy-brave exercise on the phony-tough. This is not reassuring. Phony-toughs are dangerous people to have around, above all in or near the White House—for one example, President Kennedy approved the Bay of Pigs fiasco because none of his chief advisers had the courage to seem timid. Most dismaying of all, it seems reasonable to assume that a man who, like Nixon in his first term, surrounds himself with phony-toughs may be a phony-tough himself.