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THE PRESIDENCY/HUGH SIDNEY

# A Watergate by the Sea?

*They have learned nothing and forgotten nothing.*  
—Attributed to Talleyrand, speaking of the Bourbons

Since the Nixon Administration resembles a monarchy in so many other ways, perhaps it is only natural that the above quote so aptly describes the way the White House is now answering questions about how the President acquired his luxurious San Clemente home.

Far from diminishing the suspicion that there was something funny in the deal, Nixon and his agents kindle it. Rather than taking even a quick look back over their disastrous Watergate scenario, they have walked onstage with the same old script. In short, they act guilty whether they are or not.

The latest episode occurred last week in the San Clemente Inn. Press Secretary Ron Ziegler, in his dark business suit and button-down attitude, strode into the dim chamber with all of his pre-Watergate assurance on display.

After a full year of the grossest kind of misguidance from this man, his presence triggers in reporters a salivation of distrust. He is a symbol of the Watergate infamy. He is the mouthpiece who in a singular exercise of political absolution dismissed official lying by declaring statements "inoperative." Whether he was an innocent victim of Watergate, as John Dean asserted, seems almost irrelevant. His presence on the San Clemente podium suggests that the White House considers the new issue so touchy it is sending out its top deceiver. Get ready to be misinformed.

Ziegler began casually enough with an account of the President busy in his office, conferring with aides, signing bills, making ambassadorial appointments. Then came the message, one of those carefully rehearsed explosions of indignation. The story in the Los Angeles *Times* that Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox had begun an inquiry into the purchase of the San Clemente home was denied "categorically," a favorite term from the Watergate manual. The President was "appalled," reported Ziegler. That has been his condition for months. The story in the newspaper, continued the press secretary, was "malicious, ill-founded and scurrilous." Those are all terms used repeatedly, with that exquisite Ziegler rote, in the Watergate cover-up. In a very basic Pavlovian sense, they were signals to anyone listening that there must be something to the story and the White House must again be frightened. Tentative conclusion: another Watergate.

Ziegler then went through a familiar routine, like an old western actor who can never get out of the saddle. He quoted Cox as denying that there was any consideration of a special investigation, but he left out Cox's acknowledgment that the prosecutor's office was indeed collecting information about Nixon's homes. Ziegler trotted out another Watergate tactic by referring back to a "precise, accurate, factual" statement issued in May on the San Clemente purchase. It was not a precise statement. It veiled the details of the investment company set up by Nixon's friend Robert Abplanalp to purchase about 20 acres of the estate for \$1.25 million. It also ignored totally the fact that in October 1972 the White House had said the land had not been sold, while the new statement said the land had been sold in 1970. That bit of misinformation occurred, said Ziegler, because to put it in last year's statement would have been "not appropriate," a term as devious as "inoperative."

If Ziegler had any misgivings about his performance, he did not show them when he gathered up his notes and walked back out into the California sunshine. Every indication was that when he was beyond the reach of camera lenses and the angry, unanswered questions and safely in the beautiful presidential cocoon, he was as convinced as ever that he had successfully shielded the President, who up until now has apparently lived in the same illusion.

There was, however, one faint flicker of doubt from the kingly San Clemente hilltop last week. The *Washington Post's* thoughtful correspondent Carroll Kilpatrick reported that in a meeting with one of his aides, Nixon had hammered the desk in his frustration and anger over the fact that nobody seemed to pay attention to his statements. If that is true, then maybe—just maybe—the White House Bourbons are about to lose some of their well-founded reputation for learning nothing and forgetting nothing.

DIRCK HALSTEAD



RONALD ZIEGLER