

'My God! Is This America?'

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

The administration is murmuring alarmingly friendly noises at the media. It's being said we're not half bad after all. The Vice President himself is proffering a hand. Apparently by trying to do our job, which is to do a job on McGovern, we have inadvertently not been doing one on Nixon.

Meanwhile, Nixon has been doing his job, which is throwing a new crop of people in jail. The victims in the three cases about to be cited have nothing in common except their powerlessness to defend themselves.

The saddest of those imprisoned by the President is 25-year-old Eddie Caudill, who comes from the mountain country on the West Virginia-Kentucky border. Six years ago Eddie went into the Army. He told James Branscome, who broke this story in the Whitesburg (W. Va.) Mountain Eagle, that he went reluctantly. "When I got orders, I sure didn't want to go, but I knew there was a lot of other guys going, and I wasn't one bit better than them."

Eddie not only went to Vietnam but was promoted to sergeant in charge of his own ten-man weapons squad. Nineteen days before he was to be rotated back stateside Eddie was wounded in the shoulder and the stomach by NLF rifle fire. The bullet in the stomach severed a nerve leading to his left leg so Eddie can't walk right. After being treated successively in military hospitals in Long Bin and Yokahama, he was evacuated to Walter Reed Army Hospital here in Washington where he was operated on to connect his severed intestines. At this writing, that was the last medical treatment Eddie ever got. His wound, however, was infected so that he had to treat himself by cleaning it out with Q-tips soaked in hydrogen peroxide.

Nevertheless Eddie was reassigned to duty outside the hospital. He says they promised him care but never gave it. At length he asked a Walter Reed doctor for a leave of absence to go home and was given it; when he came back he was arrested by the MPs, given a summary

court-martial but not sentenced. So he asked to go home again; again permission was given him, and again he went home, where he stayed until a few weeks ago when his wounds and his poverty forced him to go back to the Army for help. He has been in the close confinement area reserved for AWOLs at Fort Knox while his congressman, Ken Hechler of West Virginia, tries to get the Army or Nixon or somebody to treat his wounds and not court-martial him a second time.

Compared to modern Presidents, congressmen have scant power. Hechler hasn't yet been able to rescue Eddie, nor has New York Congressman Lester Wolff been able to get one of his constituents out of another of Nixon's hoosegows. This victim's name is Thomas Laffey, and he and four other men are presently in a Fort Worth jail for refusing on Fifth Amendment grounds to answer questions before a grand jury.

The matter has to do with a group of New York Irish men suspected of gun running for the IRA. The only reason for having a jury in Texas look into the charges is that there the men would be alone and without support. And they are, not convicted of any crime but incarcerated indefinitely without bail until they either squeal or Nixon lets them out. Wolff, who's down there, can't even get in to see them.

Nothing this administration has done is both so dangerous and so shoddy as its use of the grand juries to ruin people's lives. Paul O'Dwyer, a lawyer for the Irishmen, gives an example of what can happen to somebody, and this isn't even one of the men in jail:

"In their anxiety to drag the citizens of New York some 1,400 miles, the government subpoenaed one James McKeon of Rockland County, New York, who had purchased a shotgun in a sporting goods store in his hometown. He still has the shotgun. McKeon's wife explained to the prosecutor that he had a heart condition. He has been adjudged 40 per cent disabled by the Veterans authorities as a result of injuries received in the line of battle in the Korean conflict. The government agent advised Mr. McKeon that he was to be in Texas even 'if you have to drop dead.' The direction to Mr. McKeon was prophetic. In the courthouse in Texas, McKeon took a heart attack and was hauled by ambulance to the nearest hospital. Mrs. McKeon is being pursued by the hospital to pay the bill."

So from his jail cell poor Laffey writes desperate, useless letters on cheap stationery with soft lead pencils: "... the old, conservative Republican Party is dead and gone with Eisenhower in his grave ... There is a real danger that if Nixon and his party continues, freedom will die. We are the prime examples, perhaps the guinea pigs ... WE ARE INNOCENT VICTIMS torn from our wives and little innocent children. My God! Is this America?"

Then in Tallahassee, Fla., Guy Goodwin, chief of the Justice Department's Special Litigation Section of the Internal Security Division, is at work again. He is Nixon's grand jury specialist, the man who brought us

the Henry Kissinger Kidnap Follies. Now he has four
Vietnam vets in jail for refusing to talk about a con-
spiracy to attack the Republican Convention with atomic
bombs and firebombs. You will recall that the Kissinger
Kidnap Party's only witness was an ex-con paid
informant. In this case, Kissinger has paid his informant
and now offers another paid informant a man who once
told a congressional hearing that he was offered a
psychiatric discharge by the Army.

None of these cases is as well known as it should be.
If the reason for that is us media people, we deserve
the indefensible praise Agnew is giving us.

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