

Richard Spong

A Minor Watergate Irony

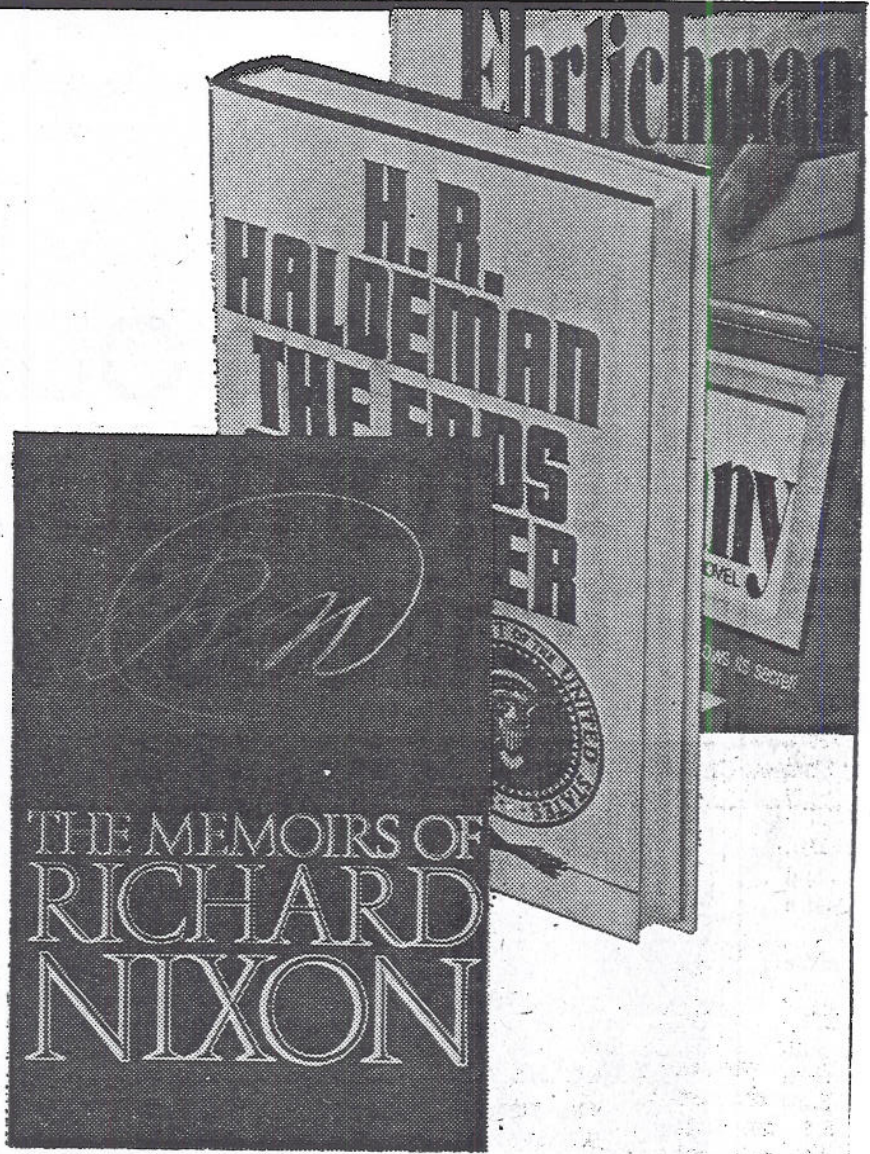
The newspaper story was simple enough. The White House had disclosed that a request for pardon for four of the original defendants in the 1972 break-in at the Democratic National Headquarters in the Watergate office building had been denied by President Carter. The four all had been released from prison in 1974.

Two weeks later another story appeared, only slightly longer, reporting that John D. Ehrlichman had joined the nation's largest radio network, the Mutual Broadcasting System, to broadcast a 2½-minute daily commentary on "current events."

There must be a certain small irony here. As the first story indicated, the only Watergate figure to have received a pardon is former president Richard M. Nixon, who was, if not the instigator of the whole clumsy business—and history probably will determine that he was indeed the instigator—certainly the prime mover in it.

Richard Nixon also was, in the hard pragmatic respect of money earned, the principal beneficiary of Watergate. Only the other day we heard from Lloyd Johnson, trustee of the Nixon Trust Fund, to the effect that the former president had advised him to cease fund-raising efforts. Nixon is now in a position to pay off his own legal debts arising from his efforts to prevent public distribution of the Watergate tapes and other presidential records.

Nixon's financial stability is unquestioned. Not long ago the Senate rejected—by a vote of 89 to 2—a proposal to deny the former president \$251,625 in annual government pensions and office expenses. Moreover, according to trade sources, he has received for his autobiography and his Watergate interviews with David Frost about \$3 million. The estimate



is probably conservative.

Profits from presidential memoirs have always reflected the satisfaction of curiosity rather than any degree of literary achievement. Ulysses S. Grant was the first former president to derive great money rewards from his writing, and his was a special case. Already ill with cancer, he began his autobiographical endeavors when left penniless by the failure of the investment house Grant & Ward. "Personal Memoirs" was completed four days before his death on July 23, 1885. The two volumes netted more than \$450,000, and though they are little read today, they remain among the great military narratives of history.

Dwight D. Eisenhower was certainly the first president to become a millionaire on the strength of his

"Crusade in Europe," published in 1948, four years before his nomination. The book was an instant best-seller. Ike also benefited on that book by a special tax treatment that can only be considered the gift of a grateful nation.

Probably it is safe to assert that only after Watergate did the great publishing houses discover the

The writer is a syndicated columnist.

mother lode represented by the true confessions of presidents, their close associates and, inevitably, their families. The Eisenhower and Nixon progeny have made several bundles off writing that would never have been published under the names of, say, Smith, Jones or Glutz. And the present and future sales and royalties of various Fords and Carters are at the moment incalculable.

At the same time, association in any way with the Watergate scandal—at least on the wrong side of the blanket—seems to have carried with it the Midas Touch. Various of those associated with investigation, prosecution and impeachment have told memoirs, but his great success was their stories, but those who struck pay dirt were those most closely associated with pay and dirt. It definitely helped to have been jailed.

Thus Jeb Magruder of the White House staff received as an advance on his first book \$100,000, and Charles Colson, who not only served time but found God, got about \$400,000 for a

book, film royalties and television. Ehrlichman, prior to signing on as the new Fulton Lewis Jr.—his boss says he will give "the unvarnished views of a man who's been there and knows what he's talking about"—picked up a neat \$500,000 for a work of fiction about the White House and the Central Intelligence Agency. H. R. Haldeman, Nixon's right bower, received more than \$500,000 for a book and a television appearance. John Dean, White House attorney and whistleblower No. 1, shared in about \$1 million for his his book and lectures and his wife's book.

The only professional writer of the lot, E. Howard Hunt, whose whodunits under the pen name of Robert Deitrich were as dubious as his sense of ethics, made the big money only after Watergate and the federal pen. For lecturing and for movie rights to his life story, Hunt's take will come to well over \$600,000.

Oddly enough, and here is the irony, only the little men who were hired by Hunt, the fellows who convinced most of us that they really did think they were doing a job for The Agency, got zip, aside from a short time in the pokey. Their names are Bernard L. Barker, Frank A. Sturgis, Eugenio R. Martinez and Virgilio Ramon Gonzalez.

The argument is not that those four should be rewarded, perish forbid. On the other hand, the only effect of a pardon is to grant official forgiveness for a crime. That seems little enough to grant to the men whose crime was so small it wasn't worth anything at the box office.