

All the Presidents' Sins

IT DIDN'T START WITH WATERGATE. By Victor Lasky. Dial. 438 pp. \$10

By NICK THIMMESCH

MENTION VICTOR LASKY's name, and most souls of liberal persuasion make faces, and shut their minds to further discussion. Years ago, Lasky's bestselling *JFK: The Man and the Myth* infuriated heady citizens of Camelot and those who wished they were. That compilation of President Kennedy's record and legend moved Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy (according to J. Edgar Hoover) to have Lasky wiretapped by "outside people." Kennedy also admitted that "overzealous" federal officials who once worked under him as Senate investigators, had conducted surveillance of Lasky.

Anyway, Lasky's other books, including the gun-for-hire work on Arthur Goldberg, won him no respect from liberals and much suspicion from other quarters. Still, those who know Lasky well, say he is the nicest ogre around. This company includes Murray Kempton, an able, liberal chronicler of our times. He and Lasky have been friends since they met at the Student League for Industrial Democracy, a Socialist group, 40 years ago.

No question that it is easier to curse Lasky than read him. But now it must be stated that his new book, *It Didn't Start With Watergate*, deserves to be read and given a place on the wide Watergate shelf. Forget that Lasky wrote it, and judge the considerable information that he and his wife, Patti, collected to argue that Adam and Eve did not commit their first sin at the Watergate, that presidents dating at least to Franklin D. Roosevelt indulged in widespread abuse of power. Lasky also claims that Richard M. Nixon, whom he greatly admires, was lynched, a view shared, but not widely advertised during Watergate's foulest

hours, by a respectable number of civil libertarians. Always, Lasky is ever ready with the skewer.

He was a skillful rewriter on newspapers, and carries the skill into bookwriting. We get small narrative, but plenty of pummeling facts: Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered FBI investigations of anyone opposing his lend-lease policy, and had top advisors, Harry

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Hopkins and Tommy "The Cork" Corcoran, wiretapped. President Truman continued the tap on Corcoran until 1948.

The Kennedys, in 1960, had one Paul Corbin make anonymous mailings of virulently anti-Catholic literature from Minnesota into Wisconsin to hurt Hubert Humphrey in the Democratic primary. During the Senate Watergate hearings, it was revealed that Kennedymen Carmine Bellino and IRS Commissioner Mortimer Caplin developed tax information on Kennedy's "enemies."

The Kennedys were the champion wiretappers of our time. Robert F. Kennedy had the New York Times military analyst, Hanson Baldwin, and his secretary, wiretapped, as well as Newsweek's Pentagon correspondent, Lloyd Norman. Moreover, according to records, the Kennedys used the "National Security" rationale, to wiretap and "bug" a congressional staffer, a congressman, and Agriculture Depart-

"If the administrations of FDR, JFK and LBJ ever had to go through investigations as fierce and wild as Watergate, there might have been

three more presidents in American history forced to resign before their terms were up."

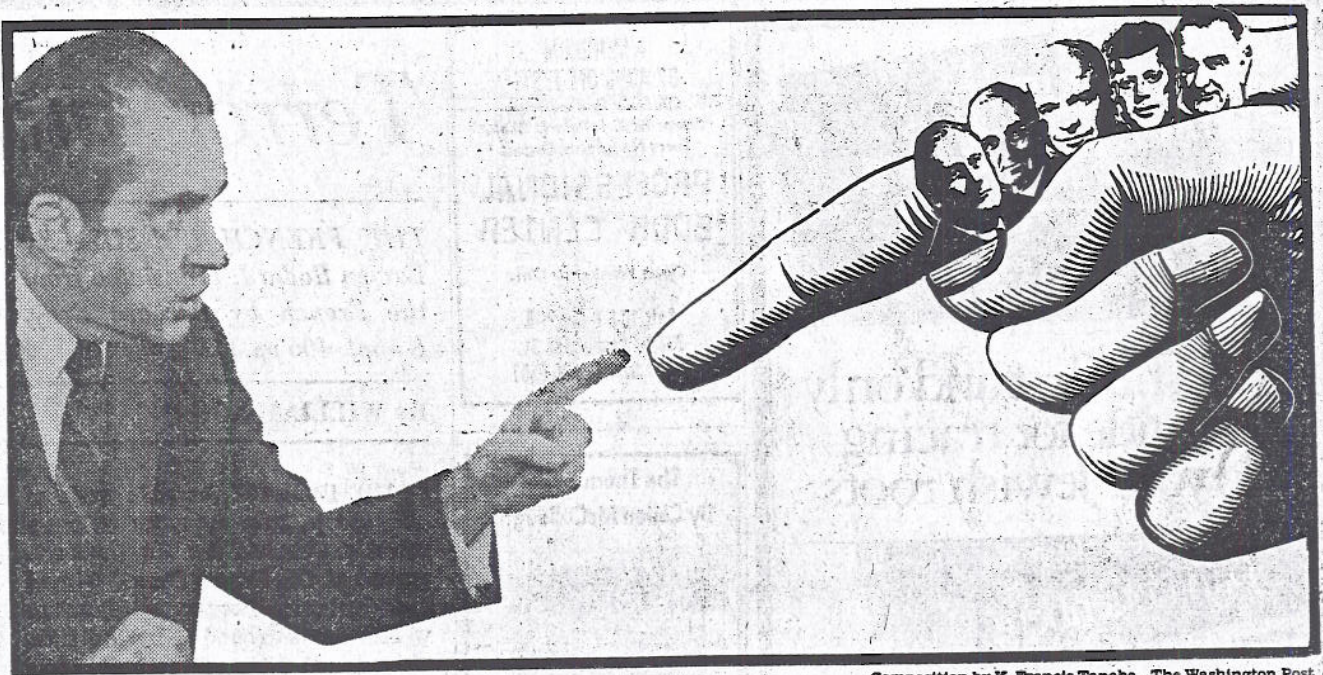
ment officials. A Mafia wiretapper claimed he did outside jobs for Robert F. Kennedy when he was attorney general because the mission couldn't be entrusted to the FBI. This sounds like the same script the Nixon White House followed when it formed the "Plumbers" unit which pursued Daniel Ellsberg.

There are other observations offered on the Kennedy brothers for whom Lasky has a fascination. He quotes that grand lama of columnists, Joseph Alsop, as having "seen a felony being cheerfully compounded by a President of the United States [Kennedy] . . . It was vastly to his own advantage but equally to the advantage of this country. I laughed and said nothing." Professor Monroe Freedman, writing in the Georgetown Law Journal, is quoted as saying that Robert F. Kennedy's grudge against Jimmy Hoffa and Roy Cohn "became the public policy of the United States . . . This is, of course, the very antithesis of the

rule of law . . ." Robert Kennedy's practice of leaking defamatory information about persons under indictment, even promoting magazine articles on them, turned out to be the same violation of law which sent Charles Colson to prison.

Lasky doesn't spare Lyndon B. Johnson by any means. Charges of a kickback to Johnson by an insurance man; the Bobby Baker case and its attendant coverup; the special FBI squad which spied on black militants at the 1964 Democratic Convention on LBJ's orders; the persecution of Delaware Republican Senator John J. Williams; the use of IRS and FBI by Johnson against his political enemies, real and imagined, including newsmen—it's all there.

If Lasky gets particularly incensed about one person in his endless recitation, it is Bill Moyers who, as FBI files later revealed, was a sort of hatchet man for Johnson. It galls Lasky that Moyers later won an "Emmy" award for his Watergate reporting on Public Broadcasting Service. The chapter on Moyers is worth the price of the book. If Moyers had committed these deeds for Richard Nixon, would CBS dared



Composition by K. Francis Tanabe—The Washington Post