

Capitol Punishment

The Seaworthy (Glub . . . Glub) Ship of State

By Art Buchwald

The Naval Court of Inquiry into the sinking of the SS Watergate was held in executive session here last week.

On the stand was Capt. Richard M. Nixon who commanded the ship at the time it went down.

Here is a partial transcript of the hearings which do not violate national security.

"Cap. Nixon, the SS Watergate sprang a leak on the morning of June 17, 1962. What did you do about it at the time?"

"I didn't think much of it. I was told by my executive officer that seven men had been fooling around in the shower room and the nozzle broke off."

"Did you order an investigation of the incident?"

"Yes, I did, and it was the most thorough investigation ever held on the high seas. I told my officers I wanted to know if anyone on my staff had anything to do with the leak. They reported back to me categorically that no one in the crew except for the seven men were involved in the incident. I accepted this as fact."

"Did you try to repair the damage at the time?"

"There was nothing to repair as far as I was concerned. The seven men were court-martialed and that was the end of it."

"But isn't it true that during the court-martial of the

seven, there were hints that other people were involved in the leak?"

"It was only hearsay. A captain has many enemies on a ship and I was not about to put credence in a lot of gossip and rumor."

"Now, Capt. Nixon, since the leak was not repaired, the lower compartments of the ship began to flood. Didn't you feel at that time you should take some action?"

"I sent my people down to inspect the damage and they said the ship was completely dry below decks."

"You didn't go down to inspect the damage yourself?"

"I had to stay on the bridge. It is a mistake for a captain to know too much about what is going on in the crew's quarters. Besides I had great faith in my officers and their ability to judge whether the ship was in jeopardy."

"Is it true that your communications officer, Lt. Ronald Ziegler, kept announcing over the loudspeaker that there was nothing wrong with the ship?"

"Yes, he did it on my orders."

"Then Lt. Ziegler hadn't gone below to inspect the damage either?"

"Not to my knowledge. We were getting continual reports from our legal officer, Lt. John Dean III, and he assured us that we were safe and our crew was clean."

"But didn't you get suspicious when the water rose to the main deck?"

"I didn't like it, but I didn't consider it my problem. I've been in storms before, six to be exact, and I've always been able to weather them. Besides, my staff told me not to pay any attention because the ship was built to withstand any kind of pressure."

"When did you decide that you were really in danger?"

"On March 21, 1973, I received some startling information from my officers that the leak did not come from a shower, but that we had really hit an iceberg."

"Then you decided to take action."

"Yes, I went on the loudspeaker myself and said that anyone responsible for hitting the iceberg would be immediately removed from the crew."

"And when did you decide to abandon ship?"

"When the water got up to my hips and I noticed all my officers starting to take to the lifeboats."

"How did you feel about losing so many of your crew?"

"I felt badly about it, but by that time it was every man for himself."