

Capitol Punishment

A Sort of White-Collar May Day

By Art Buchwald

Nobody knows how many people will eventually be arrested in the Watergate case, but so many people have been implicated that the Justice Department has contingency plans ready when the indictments are finally handed down.

On May 1, 1971, 12,000 people were arrested in Washington, D.C., in an antiwar demonstration. A Justice official told me he didn't expect the Watergate to break this record, but the department wasn't taking any chances.

"Since D.C. Jail may not be able to accommodate everyone involved in the Watergate, we've rented the RFK Stadium to handle the overflow. We also have an option on the Coliseum in case the RFK Stadium fills up."

"That's good thinking," I said.

"We also have chartered buses in Washington, Maryland and Virginia to transport people to the detention centers. During the May Day demonstrations in 1971, we were accused of violating the constitutional rights of the 12,000 people we picked up, and we don't intend to be criticized for mishandling the Watergate arrests."

"Do you have enough lawyers to defend all the Watergate people?"

"We don't in Washington, but we have 3,000 lawyers standing by in Boston, 2,000 in New York, and 4,000 in Chicago. If this is not enough, the President has authority to call up the American Bar Association Reserves.

"We have 30 C5A transport planes that can fly a division of airborne lawyers to Washington in two hours.

"You've thought of everything," I told the Justice Department officials.

"Obviously when you have mass arrests such as we're expecting in the Watergate case, there will be some abuses, but we intend to have Justice Department law-

yers spread out in every section of town to see that the rights of the people are protected. The police have been instructed to use as little force as possible, and no tear gas unless it is absolutely necessary."

"You seem to be following the guidelines of former Attorney General Mitchell," I suggested.

"Yes, the former Attorney General was very interested in mass arrests, though I'm certain he never thought we would have to use the same guidelines so soon."

"How long do you think it will take to arraign all the people?"

"It's hard to say. If we can get several judges over to RFK Stadium, I wouldn't think anyone would have to be detained for more than 48 hours. But if we have to transport them to the federal courthouse, I can't see how we could get everyone processed in less than a week."

"Is it possible that some of the people you pick up in the Watergate case may be innocent and falsely accused?"

"There's always that possibility," the Justice Department official said, "but we're not talking about an ordinary situation now. We're talking about the Watergate. And whenever you have that many citizens involved in anything, innocent people are going to be caught up in the dragnet. How can you ask a policeman to say to someone in the middle of a mass arrest 'Did you or didn't you have anything to do with the Watergate case and the coverup?'"

The Justice Department official warned me not to predict the number of people who would eventually be arrested. "I think the newspapers have been overplaying the story," he said. "While we're ready to meet any contingency and handle up to 15,000 suspects, our prediction is that no more than 5,000 people from the White House and the Committee for the Re-election of the President will actually be detained."