

The Washington Merry-Go-Round

American System Is Still Holding Up

By Jack Anderson

Sooner or later Sen. Sam J. Ervin Jr., jowls wobbling and brows popping, will loose upon the country another biblical admonition: Woe unto the world because of offenses! For it must needs be that offenses come; but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh.

That one seems a natural for the wise old senator because it proclaims the inevitability that man will transgress and the requirement that he be deterred. This is forgotten today by many who, sickened by scandal piled upon scandal, fear the American system has gone sour and no longer works. But before we give up on it, let's recall just what our system is and what it is not.

If the noble experiment of 1776 had been based on the hope that American officials would be naturally honest and decent, that presidents and generals would never lie, that bureaucrats would uphold the law, that judges would always be just and that congressmen wouldn't cheat, we would have to concede that their scheme had turned out a sorry fiasco.

But the government was founded upon the opposite assumption—that rulers may be conditioned and constrained to do right but, in their natural state, they must ever be

suspect of the worst follies and sins. So it was that the fathers inscribed on our founding documents an indictment of homo politicus, per se, and a litany of the iniquities of George III, along with a prediction that his American successors would turn out no better if left to their own resorts.

The fathers set about restricting the mischief of officialdom by limiting its powers and by dividing up such powers as were permitted among different branches, so that each might act as a check on the others. A large portion was left to the people and the press, along with the obligation to act as watchdog.

But we forget our constitutional obligation to be exacting taskmasters toward the temporary stewards who use our money and authority. We backslide and begin to equate citizenship with mere obedience, and patriotism with symbols, songs and reverence toward office-holders. And we get a secret war in Cambodia, an ITT case, a Watergate.

Does this mean our structure of state is foundering? I think not. Our fathers protected us against our own negligence. The American system was constructed like a battleship, with successive rings of watertight compartments. At

any given time, only one or two need hold to keep the ship afloat.

When the threat comes, say from the presidency as in Watergate, the structure sinks only if all its checks collapse—only if the press fails to expose, the opposition party declines to oppose, the public neglects to care, Congress refuses to resist, the courts demur from the law. In the light of Watergate, how has the system held up? Transgressions came against our liberties, against decency, against the law, against the electoral process itself, as our forefathers had foreseen. But even the trespassers were restrained by our traditions. It may be said for the President and the men around him that they attempted no frontal coup. Their illegalities were attempted on the sly; their aggrandizements were pressed only as far as the traffic would bear.

The response? Some reporters did their job of investigation. The opposition party went to court and, though tempted to settle for money, refused to do so. A slow trickle of truth began inexorably to command events. Public indignation built up, slowly but surely. Congress, led by a

venerable gentleman from North Carolina, who for many years has carried a copy of the Constitution around in his pocket, rose to the occasion.

The courts were redeemed in the person of Judge John J. Sirica, who would not accept a cover-up, however well packaged. And round the country, juries, polls and legislative majorities have repudiated the un-American claims to power. The antidotes of the fathers, like a physic of delayed but wondrous potency, are working their will.

Men are prone to look first at outward appearances. To many of our people and to querulous populations around the globe America must appear in torment and turmoil; the President on the run, the FBI and CIA compromised, the government paralyzed, the market jittery, TV serials interrupted, all started by a little break-in.

Yet the ill-wishers must begin to wonder at this marvel of liberty, as they see the leader of the foremost nation of the world, who commands great armies and treasuries, waiting glumly upon the verdict of a free people as to what was the truth about a burglary. For me, it is a spectacle to set the spine tingling with that boyhood pride of country.