

Journal of the Plagued Years

WASHINGTON JOURNAL: *The Events of 1973-1974.* By Elizabeth Drew. Random House. 428 pp. \$12.95

By HAYNES JOHNSON

LONG BEFORE Elizabeth Drew's *Washington Journal* was published, two opinions were expressed about it. Oh, no, not again, another Watergate book. And: let it age for another decade and we'll discover how valuable a document it is.

I have no doubt that Drew's *Journal* will be read 10 years, and more, from now. She has succeeded admirably in coolly, clinically, meticulously recording the way it was. Her work is bound to be indispensable. But it would be a considerable loss if her book is not read widely now. It could not be more relevant to the Washington of the present.

Understandably, most accounts we have had of Watergate are cast in terms of leading actors, bold heroes, ignoble villains—the reporter as detective, the presidential aide as private caretaker of responsibilities and savior of the Republic, the chief executive as master conspirator, the obscure judge or congressman wrestling alone with conscience and rising to greatness. In Elizabeth Drew's journal there are really no central characters. What she records is more important than personalities. She describes a historic threat to the American system—the constitutional system—and shows with chilling clarity how close we came to forfeiting basic rights. Drew achieves another distinction: she writes about the real Washington in a way I have seldom, if ever, seen captured. Her conversations with congressmen, senators, aides, journalists and assorted political power brokers are unmistakably authentic, and often deadly.

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"The Congress is like a school of fish," one Senate aide tells her. "They dart one way, and then another. You don't know which fish will dart out and make the next move that they will all follow. There aren't built-in leaders and followers."

And, later: "Congress is on dead center. There is no movement. These guys have no capacity for movement. Nothing that has happened is the result of action by the Congress—only of ineptitude in the cover-up by the executive branch. Everyone who is looking at the Congress for leadership is misdirecting his attention. Being statesmanlike is synonymous with being inactive."

Anyone who has read her work, first in *The Atlantic* and now in *The New Yorker*, where many of these pages appeared earlier, knows that Drew is a journalist of impeccable credentials and sound judgment. In this book, she demonstrates a shrewd sense about Washington that often is missing from the accounts of her journalistic colleagues.

An example:

For all its talk about public opinion's being formed "out there," the Nixon White House obviously believes that public opinion is manufactured here—either by the "Eastern press" and the networks or by the White House. In part it is right, and in part it is quite wrong. There are other ways, some of them almost mysterious, in which public opinion is formed. There have been many times when "the public" (sometimes called "the country") perceived things before "Washington" did. "Washington" can become accustomed to the way things are, its thinking imprisoned by insiders' knowledge. It can find a certain amusement in the Congress's more outrageous characters and quaint rituals. "Washington" knew that the campaign-contribution laws had been flouted since, it seemed, the beginning. "Washington" knew that the regulatory agencies tended to serve the industries they were to

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regulate. It knew that public officials lied. It knew these things. It just didn't talk about them much. That was the way things worked. "Washington" is often surprised when questions are first raised about these matters. The deep uneasiness about Lyndon Johnson took form in "the country" before it was felt in Washington, where we were used to him, and where many of us were on friendly terms with his assistants.

"The public" has a more complex set of views and reactions than many politicians think—or, at least, appear to think. "Realistic" politicians learn the lore of their trade: that "the public" dislikes taxes and welfare; that it can be angry and it can be militaristic. This is probably all true, but so are other things about "the public"—feelings about human justice and fair play and peace. That accounts for some of the wild swings in the polls . . . The important thing is not the number of people who think what at any given moment, but the relative power, and momentum, of ideas. As the peace marchers went by the White House, President Johnson asked how many troops they had.

Journalism is, at best, hopelessly flawed by the pressures of time, space and daily events. Even Drew's journal, which does not rest upon daily exposure to the public, has its problems. I found it maddening, for example, to keep being told, again and again, how dramatic, historic, swift and incomprehensible were the events through which we were living. And I found the first part of her journal far more evocative than the last. These, though, are only quibbles. Drew's journal is superb journalism. It is also a reminder that journalism can be something more than the mere recording of daily events. Her New Yorker colleague, John McPhee, speaks of "The literature of fact." Elizabeth Drew here offers an example of that art. □