

The Gang's All Here

Book
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THE FRIENDS OF RICHARD NIXON. By George V. Higgins. Atlantic/Little, Brown. 295 pp. \$10.95

By ERIC REDMAN

IN 1970, George Higgins became a federal prosecutor; two years later, he became a novelist as well. The marriage of vocations proved felicitous, spawning three best-selling accounts of life and death in the Boston underworld — *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*, *The Digger's Game*, and *Cogan's Trade*. Earlier this year, Higgins produced an excellent political novel, *A City on a Hill*, in which a young antiwar congressman and his aides struggle fruitlessly to resurrect for 1976 the presidential campaign of a New England Democratic senator who flopped in '72. It's hard to say whether Higgins writes better about crime or politics; the beauty of *Watergate*, his latest subject, is that it allows him to do both.

The Friends of Richard Nixon is best when it relies on the singular genius Higgins demonstrated in his crime novels: the ability to adopt the perspective of a conspirator (or prosecutor), illuminate his daily chores, and imbue the whole with an unshakable sense of authenticity. The conspiracy here is the Watergate cover-up, the featured con-

spirator is John Dean, and the prosecutor is the unlucky (Higgins says "victimized") Earl Silbert. What emerges is a convincing explanation of the cover-up — and guaranteed controversy.

At first, Higgins says, Dean didn't know who had planned the Watergate break-in, and therefore didn't know who required protection. Pat Gray suspected a CIA operation, and perpetuation of that myth (which Nixon authorized) appealed to Dean because it would "derail" the entire investigation, "rescuing not only the innocent, but the guilty as well, whoever the hell they were." But the CIA balked, of course, and soon Dean knew more: He knew he had to protect Mitchell and Magruder, which required a bit of perjury from them and total cooperation from the burglars.

Dean could offer the burglars hush money, even vague promises of clemency and "rehabilitation," but he lacked the threat

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Illustration by Edward Sorel (from the book jacket)

employed by the Mob to make such blandishments (and time in jail) acceptable — hit men, practitioners of Cogan's trade, were out of the question. He therefore realized the cover-up might eventually collapse, and tried, unsuccessfully, to impress that uncomfortable possibility upon his "client," Richard Nixon.

Silbert, however, couldn't collapse it quickly. He didn't know Gray was talking to Dean, and Henry Petersen to Nixon, making the cover-up an easier task. He did know the original defendants weren't talking at all. The Cubans wouldn't talk because they believed Watergate to be a CIA operation in fact. Hunt believed his arrest had been based on evidence illegally seized from his White House safe, and consequently thought he had a legal defense. McCord assumed he "had the fix in," and even called two foreign embassies to give the Administration grounds to dismiss his prosecution (rather than

reveal two previously undisclosed wiretaps). Liddy wouldn't talk because he was Liddy — a "stand-up guy" considerably more firm in his resolve than the late Eddie Coyle.

Silbert apparently planned to pressure the full story from the defendants after conviction, when his sentencing recommendation might weigh more heavily in their calculations, and when, without risk, he could give them immunity before the grand jury and jail them immediately if they persisted in their reticence. This standard prosecutorial strategy had worked before, Higgins reminds us, most notably in the Yablonski murder case. Higgins's central argument is that it would have worked again, if Sirica, the Ervin Committee and the special prosecutor had not intervened — if Silbert had just been left alone.

Higgins may have overstated his case; it's possible to sympathize with Silbert yet still

question whether he had sufficient resources to bring the case "inexorably" to conclusion. Could any assistant U.S. attorney have subpoenaed Nixon's tapes and enforced that subpoena in court? Could he have made the "serviceable contribution" Higgins grudgingly accords the Ervin Committee: overcoming, in the public mind, the hitherto "conclusive presumption" of presidential innocence? Could he not have been fired more easily — and quietly — than Archibald Cox?

A more troubling question, perhaps, is whether Silbert could possibly have been left alone in any event. While Sirica and the press fretted daily about a broader conspiracy, Silbert's superiors at the Justice Department uttered assurances that the investigation had been painstaking and complete. Silbert argued to the jury that Liddy had "organized and directed this enterprise right from the start" — a reasonable trial tactic, as Higgins shows, but hardly conducive to public equanimity. After the trial, Silbert's colleagues on the prosecution staff even returned to other duties. Silbert may not have erred, but most of us — unlike Higgins — had no way of knowing it.

Unfortunately, Higgins's knowledgeable defense of Silbert is more than provocative; it sets the book's somewhat contemptuous tone and largely shapes its apparent mission, the controverting of what Higgins evidently perceives as the conventional wisdom about Watergate. Of Sam Ervin, Sam Dash, or John Sirica, there is hardly a charitable word. The best Higgins can say for Cox is that knowing nothing of prosecution himself, he at least hired someone (Henry Ruth) who did.

Nixon's lawyers, on the other hand, draw Higgins's praise, and thus escape the overdue ethical scrutiny he might profitably have provided. Charles Colson is summarily absolved of any wrong-doing in the cover-up or the Ellsberg break-in — a conclusion Higgins reaches only by ignoring all the evidence against him. Higgins calls the prosecution of Richard Kleindienst "mistaken," not because Kleindienst didn't lie to the Senate about ITT, but because he successfully resisted Nixon's orders to drop the case.

Such conclusory pronouncements underscore the basic shortcoming of *The Friends of Richard Nixon*: We receive all of Higgins's opinions and only a portion of his skill. When a novelist of Higgins's sensitivity reduces all characters (except Dean and Silbert) to mere caricatures, it's an indication that Higgins the advocate, rather than Higgins the writer, has gained the upper hand. The result is certainly challenging, and perhaps a worthwhile corrective to a great many hasty popular judgments. But in view of Higgins's talents, it's a case of something squandered, something gained. □