

part 5/26/73

Two Theories on the Watergate

This city has two theories about what happened before and after the Watergate break-in. The first is advanced by those who want to believe in the President or for whom the thought of the Watergate spinning on toward impeachment or resignation is too horrible to contemplate. The second is held by those who think that Mr. Nixon is untrustworthy and who maintain that the only way to gain respect for the office of the presidency is to put someone in it who has clean hands.

One of the two theories must be true. Which one do you buy?

Theory No. 1 begins by recalling the bright young amateurs who came to town with John Kennedy in 1961, Robert S. McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy himself. The average IQ was high. Yet what was the first thing these bright young amateurs bought?

It was a plan put forward by Richard Bissel and Allen Dulles of CIA, and it called for landing 2,000 men in Cuba to take on an army 1 million strong.

Ridiculous. Stupid. But bright amateurs have a tendency to be taken in by old pros. When the amateurs asked questions, they were reassured. At each suggestion of difficulty the old pros nodded in anticipation. They had foreseen it. If such and such happened, there were contingency plans.

Result: disaster. Now switch to 1972.

Mr. Nixon has a new set of bright young amateurs as bright as the Kennedy crowd and a lot more devious. There is one in particular, a certain Charles Colson, who catches the admiration of his fellows by helping to defeat a U.S. senator running for re-election. He does it by feeding doubtful information about the senator to a reporter from Life magazine. Now, with his own boss up for re-election, he has gained confidence as well as experience. He calls in a friend named E. Howard Hunt, who has retired from the CIA, and there are the old pros again, telling the amateurs they have a plan.

Result: disaster.

When the plan goes sour, everybody runs for cover and the one man they are most anxious to hide from is the boss. Over and over, Mr. Nixon asks, "John, Bob, Chuck, is anybody on the staff involved in this thing?" Over and over, John, Bob and Chuck reply, "No, Mr. President. Nobody."

That's theory No. 1. Before you buy it, take a look at theory No. 2. Theory No. 2 rests upon the known fact that Richard Nixon is a political animal, that he loves politics, talks politics, lives politics. "Look at William Ruckelshaus," say the advocates of theory No. 2, "when, as chief of the Environmental Protection Agency, he wangled a rare interview with the boss, did the

boss ask him about the environment? No. He asked him about politics in Indiana. And whose politics did the President admire most among those on the White House staff? He liked Charles Colson's politics." So, this theory argues, those long sessions with Colson which were often attended by H. R. (Bob) Haldeman and John Ehrlichman must have dealt with politics.

Particularly after the Watergate break-in was exposed, almost nobody except Haldeman, Ehrlichman and Colson got in to see the President, according to one of those who serve on the White House staff. According to the same source, after Colson's departure, the circle tightened. Is it possible that those three men meeting for hours together did not talk at length about the Watergate? The advocates of theory No. 2 don't believe it. They think the President knew at least about the cover-up.

Approaches to the CIA and the FBI by Haldeman and Ehrlichman simply couldn't have gone unreported to him, they argue. What if Richard Helms at CIA or L. Patrick Gray at FBI insisted on talking to the boss?

And so, says theory No. 2, the President sat with Haldeman and Ehrlichman and planned how to get out of the mess, until, at the end, it became clear that Haldeman and Ehrlichman had to go.