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Watergate myths occupy the minds of otherwise reasonable people

WASHINGTON—Some weeks ago a newspaper columnist named James Jackson Kilpatrick published a fascinating myth to explain the wiretapping and burglary of the Watergate. I call it a myth. Kilpatrick put it forward as a theory. He picked it up, he said, from a man experienced in the ways of secret intelligence and though he didn't say he believed it, he published it rather in the style of one who says, "Could be." The myth goes like this:

Fidel Castro in Cuba, being fresh out of Russian aid, wishes to establish ties with the United States. What better means to establish ties with the United States than to buy a whole political party? And what better way to buy a whole political party than to pay off that party's embarrassing debt?

Therefore, so the Kilpatrick theory goes, Castro made an offer, or talked about making one. Evidence was in the files of the Democratic National Committee. Expatriate Cubans got wind of the offer and tipped off the Republicans. In turn, the Republicans gave the Cubans the means to try to get the evidence, thus embarrassing Democrats and the Democratic party forever.

It's a great myth and the right wing has now picked it up and is running hard with it. It has everything. It implicates Democrats with Communists. It absolves the men who broke into Democratic National Committee headquarters and the men who paid them. It has romance. It has intrigue. It has that clarity of explanation which mythmaking demands.

Columnist William Buckley Jr. has accepted it as a possible explanation for the conduct of his old friend, E. Howard Hunt, the White House consultant involved in the affair. As Buckley adopts the myth, Hunt is a great patriot arrested on a technicality. It is rather as though Paul Revere had been stopped at Lexington by some zealous constable citing regulations about galloping on Main St.

But the odd thing about a myth is that

it almost always gives rise to a countermyth. John Kennedy was no sooner murdered than it was a left-wing plot. Oswald was no sooner arrested than it was a right-wing plot.

Well, Kilpatrick and Buckley now have their countermyth. I heard it the other evening from a U.S. senator who shall here be nameless. "How," I asked him, "do you account for the Watergate?"

"When it all comes out," he replied, "I think it will lead to Arthur Bremer."

"What?" I asked, astonished. "You mean the man who shot George Wallace? How could he be involved in the Watergate?"

The senator regarded me coolly. "There are a lot of right-wing nuts in this country," he answered, "and they think the election of Richard Nixon is the only way to save the country from communism. Wouldn't it be natural for them to try to get rid of Wallace in order to make sure Nixon would win? And if the Democrats had the goods on them, wouldn't they try to steal it out of the Democratic files?"

"To every action," wrote Sir Isaac Newton, "there is always a counteraction." When the right wing invents a myth, the left will invent a countermyth and vice versa. Thus two silly premises, leading to even sillier conclusions, occupy the minds of otherwise reasonable men.

Where myths are concerned, I'm a centrist. I think they're dangerous. They put halos on dishonest crooks, invest criminality with patriotism, make enemies out of opponents and turn benighted idiots into vast and incalculable forces.

Which is an additional reason why Richard Nixon owes it to his countrymen to give them the facts on the Watergate. The dreaming that is now going on is dangerous dreaming. Winston Churchill put the case for the rational minded: "Facts," he said, "are better than dreams."