

The Jolly Splinterhead

WA Post 5/21/73

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

Up on the Hill, Senator Sam had tapped his Watergate Committee to order. A few minutes later, down at the White House end of Pennsylvania Avenue, Ron Ziegler appeared for the daily briefing in front of the blue curtain in the press room.

No longer sullen as they once were, the reporters moved up to him almost laughing. They took out their notebooks and looked attentive, but one of them had a New York Times crossword puzzle concealed in his. Ziegler started speaking and a second reporter whispered to a visitor, "Look, see how every time he talks his nose grows."

Faithful to their calling but agile to avoid being harpooned by the ever-lengthening nasal appendage, they plied Pinocchio with questions. Who, for instance, had paid for San Clemente, the home of the kindly old puppet maker, Papa Geppetto? Pinocchio answered that another member of Papa Geppetto's staff was collecting the information on that—and his nose grew a little longer. The reporters took the response to mean that some person or persons unknown were at work some place diligently forging new records, which in the fullness of time would be revealed as frauds.

Someone brought up kindly old Papa Geppetto's morbid penchant for snitching medical records. This time they weren't asking about Ellsberg but Tom Eagleton. "Here again the convergence of events leads me not to step right out and issue flat denials," Pinocchio answered, and this time his nose shrunk a bit.

The White House's jolly splinterhead has become concerned about his grotesque, nasal disfigurement and is trying his best to keep from getting any bigger. When he resorts to avoidance rather than outright lies the rate of growth slows appreciably, but then the mean reporters shout things at him like, "Your answers run the gamut from vague to opaque."

The strategy also subjects the poor puppet to humiliating cross-examinations like this one, which took place a few days ago over the Watergate investigation report that Nixon says John W. Dean III, his discharged White House counsel, gave him. Here are excerpts of the buzz-saw job Pinocchio had to put up with.

Q: Why did you refuse for eight months to tell us whether this report was written or oral?

A: Here, again, I don't think I should respond specifically to that question except to say that that was the guidance provided.

Q: Why won't you respond to it, Ron?

A: My response to you, in relation to me . . . is when these questions came up, we sought guidance and the guidance we were provided was to respond as we did.

Q: Who did you seek guidance from?

A: We sought guidance from the counsel's office.

Q: Ron, when you say "the counsel's office, do you mean individuals other than Mr. Dean?"

A: Well, Mr. Dean himself and members of Mr. Dean's staff.

Q: You were told it was written, and now discover it wasn't?

A: No. I said we never did indicate it was written.

Q: Why did you not tell us it was oral when we first asked?

A: As I said before, the guidance provided was to—

Q: Were you told to lie about it, or pass off the questions that you could have answered?

A: The fact of the matter is that we never indicated one way or another what form the Dean report took . . . the point I am trying to make is that the President called for an investigation. He wanted it thoroughly investigated. (Laughter.)

Contretemps like these, along with Senator Sam's performance as the magisterial shrewdie, contribute to a sense of victorious giddiness about the town. Such feelings are premature.

Papa Geppetto is still hard at work in his shop. He has just manufactured a pluperfect Harvard-effete Eastern establishmentarian, Archibald Cox, as his special Watergate prosecutor. You could't find a man with better credentials and worse qualifications. Having failed twice at two lesser investigations (Columbia University and the Massachusetts judicial inquiry, this ineffectual gentleman will provide the nation with the tepid tea of confused inaction.

Behind him comes the World's Biggest Bolshie, Leonid Brezhnev, who will come here and be used to campaign to save Nixon. The irony of Nixon, of all people, employing both Harvard and Moscow to bail him out should take us all two degrees beyond astonishment. But then the man, in a moment of supreme necrophilia, went down to his Norfolk naval base the other day and promised to wage war, not on behalf of the living, but of the dead—namely our MIAs.

Papa Geppetto is prolific in his workshop. He can manufacture his little wooden servants faster than the Senate or the press together can chop them up. In the White House press room they commiserate with Pinocchio, who is rumored to be suffering a case of terminal termites.

When he is dismembered, this wooden Disneyland critter, and is burning brightly in the fireplace, we will have only to look up at the blue curtain to see his replica standing there.

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