

Poster

Pinning the Guilt

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

Watergate may be the best thing to happen to the American presidency in this century. That's a very minority opinion as will be obvious enough in the coming months of weeping, beard-pulling and lamentation about how the exposure of these crimes has damaged public confidence not only in the man, but public respect for the office.

To protect the office, many who care nothing for Nixon will want to spare him direct responsibility for what he's been doing in the White House. Hence there will be much talk about disloyal advisers, and "the people around him," as though they'd gotten into the place without his consent. In fact, Nixon is more responsible because he's run such a tight ship. As H. R. Haldeman, his major domo, said at a time when such a statement didn't constitute incriminating evidence, "All the power in the White House is in one man. I don't think there are seconds or thirds or fourths."

If pinning the guilt on Nixon himself lessens the general reverence for the presidency we ought to give that band of burglars a medal. A certain deference to high public office is permissible, even desirable, but our treatment of the presidency is nothing short of political Mariolatry—the heresy in the Roman Catholic Church of regarding the Virgin as the equal of the Trinity.

The tendency of Americans to look upon the chief magistrate as an elected monarch was noted long ago, but in the last 40 years or so, he's graduated from being our suffragan king to the status of emperor. We have people running around loose who think voting against an incumbent President is an unpatriotic act. If there weren't a no-third-term amendment the electorate would have converted the presidency into a life-time job years ago. Harry Truman would have just left the White House.

President-worship is so pervasively accepted that the pictures of the reigning monarch's puss on 10 million walls no more registers on us than Mao's probably does on the Chinese. It doesn't occur to us that it's a bit of an imposition on a free people to have time preempted on all three networks when the Sun King opens the royal yap to address his subjects.

As much as some of us malicious spirits might like to blame Nixon for the evolution to such grotesque preeminence, history forbids it. He isn't the first President to endow the job with its sacerdotal functions. You can look backward and find Lincoln acting as both President and high priest of the American secular religion. If the sermon we call the Second Inaugural is a work of art, it is still Lincoln acting as presidential Pope just as much as Nixon's vulgar prayer breakfasts.

Our awe of Presidents doesn't limit itself to living incumbents. We even protect the dead ones. Men who couldn't stand his guts when he was alive are made uncomfortable by the disclosures of Franklin Roosevelt's adulteries. Americans demand that neither their parents nor their presidents have sex lives.

We approach our Presidents with our heads bowed, which makes it impossible to look at them. If, instead of assuming a position of blind, servile piety, we'd been looking at Nixon, we'd long ago have known a lot more about how he and his companions were manning the

yardarms of the ship of state.

We, with our the-President-can-do-no-wrong conviction, had decided to ignore the string of scandals, any one of which should have resulted in the indictments of very high Nixon appointees. Even now Nixon is being allowed to investigate himself and thus limit what is allowed to come out. Only a few men in Congress like Henry Reuss of Wisconsin are screaming about the impropriety of Nixon's assistant attorney general, Henry Peterson, carrying on this inquiring in which some of the ugliest questions have hardly been raised.

It appears that at least \$1 million in unaudited cash was stashed in various safes for the purpose of paying people to commit unethical and/or criminal acts. We now know that after some of the crooks were apprehended, indicted and convicted they remained on Nixon's payroll.

A special prosecutor, say a Republic lawyer of unquestioned integrity like Chicago's Albert Jenner, might find out who put up these huge sums of money. Were these men who knew they were paying for crime or was this money extorted from businessmen? For months now here in Washington the rumor has been circulating that a number of business contributors were black-jacked into kicking in under the threat that the new environmental laws or the Phase II price control regulations would be used against them.

The pressure to open up all the cans of worms on the Nixon grocery store shelves can't come from a citizenry that thinks the White House is a cathedral. It must come from people with a touch of cynicism, for they are the sort who do ask questions.

Remember, after what Kennedy and Johnson got away with, even a President less rapacious than Nixon would have tried for more. Any gink in that job knows that if we're on our knees in the voting booth with our hands clasped and our eyes closed, we ain't watching.