

Bugged Again by Friends of a Sort

Forgive me for returning to a theme that has bugged — if that's quite the word — and dismayed me during the unpeeling of the rancid Watergate case. It has to do with the intervention of "friends" of some of the accused.

"Friends" are supplying a considerable portion of all of the hard news that has surfaced in the newspapers and on the air. With "friends" like that, the suspects never will have to worry about making enemies.

For example, one of the more explosive moments of the crisis-every-day story was the announcement that former Attorney General John Mitchell had told "friends" that sure, he had heard about the plans to deflower Larry O'Brien's domain but that he had righteously nixed it. This information was not attributed to Mitchell himself. It came from persons characterized simply as his "friends."

Some "friends!" Mitchell had testified earlier under oath that he had never heard of the sordid plot. Now his "friends" were making him sound like a perjurer — and perjurers have been known to go to prison, a most unhappy habitat for an esteemed man whose job it was to send convicted scoundrels there.

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L. PATRICK GRAY, who either withdrew or was withdrawn as J. Edgar Hoover's successor, also has the misfortune to have "friends." His "friends" happily reported that Gray, like a dummy, destroyed the files seized from the office of convicted Watergate bugster E. Howard Hunt Jr. The New York Times put it this way:

"Mr. Gray, under close questioning by friends, has insisted that neither (John W.) Dean nor (John D.) Ehrlichman informed him of what was in the Hunt files and that he destroyed them without examining their contents."

That smacks of a cynicism that could dump dozens of Republicans out of office in the off-year elections of 1974 and the top banana voting of 1976. It smacks also of crime, in relation to a man who was within inches of becoming a respected successor to the most fabled crime buster of them all, J. Edgar.

Conceivably, Gray's alleged shredding or burning of these vital documents might have been swept under the rug forever if his friends had not brought him under "close questioning."

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary seems already outdated, so far as the Watergate case is concerned. It defines "friend" as "one attached to another by affection or esteem; one that is not hostile; one that is of the same nation, party, or group."

It occurs that in Washington these days the only friends the Watergate principals seem to have are their traditional "best friends" — their dogs. I've heard of dogs biting their masters in a fit of righteousness or hunger, but never heard of a dog turning him into a grand jury.

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SOME PEOPLE STILL THINK of Watergate as a caper, not a calamity that may have destroyed great reputations and pulled the rug from under a President who worked wonders in Peking and Moscow and hopes to do the same in Tokyo and the capitals of Europe.

Fellow wrote to the editor of the N. Y. Daily News: "I'm sick of Watergate. Football teams have spies, industries spy on one another, and the U. S. spies on Russia. Why can't the GOP spy on Democrats. If President Nixon personally had a hand in Watergate, it wouldn't change my regard for him."

A friend of a friend writes, "Why don't you press guys stop bellyaching about Watergate? When the Pentagon Papers were stolen, copied, and distributed surreptitiously, you guys all applauded that particular crime. Wouldn't surprise me a bit if it turns out that it was the Democrats who really bugged the place, just so they could expose it and blame it on the other fellows."

It takes all kinds. . .