



Eugene Mihaesco

NYTimes

The Consuming Shadows

MAY 18 1973

By Jeffrey Bell

CAMBRIDGE—In resigning his post as President Nixon's chief domestic adviser, John D. Ehrlichman wrote: "The nature of my position . . . has always demanded that my conduct be both apparently and actually beyond reproach. I have always felt that the appearance of honesty and integrity is every bit as important to such a position as the fact of one's honesty and integrity." This is highly questionable moral philosophy, but truer words of political realism have rarely been spoken.

The words have an equal, perhaps even greater, application to the position of President Nixon himself. For what it is worth, I think it quite possible that the President's greatest sin in the Watergate affair was negligence.

My reason for this is not particularly flattering to Mr. Nixon: as a member of his 1968 campaign staff, I learned to my dismay that the candidate was almost completely remote from the most important aspects of the drive to elect him. This was in part a self-imposed isolation, stemming from his unsuccessful 1960 experience when he kept track of every paper clip; in part it reflected the desire of his closest aides, including H. R. Haldeman and John Mitchell, to pursue certain tactics instead of others. But in any event the isolation was real. If as a nonincumbent candidate in 1968 Mr. Nixon did not even know the nature of his own spot advertising campaign (which is the case), it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that as an incumbent in 1972 he knew nothing of the Watergate affair or of the attempt to cover it up.

But I would argue that this is beside the point. Even if the President is innocent it is unlikely he can continue to govern if he is perceived as guilty by the bulk of the American people.

Some have argued (though not usually in print) that if the President is guilty, or if a thorough investigation would make him appear guilty, a thorough investigation should not be made. Secondary reasons are cited on behalf of this view (including the very weak one that previous Presidents have done much the same thing), but the core of the argument is that the country would be seriously damaged by the widespread belief (whether founded or not) that the President had engaged in illegal activity, or had concealed such activity.

This argument, while it has some merit, is also beside the point. By all accounts, there are powerful Democrats in Congress who would prefer the investigation to stop short of implicating the President. But the Watergate investigation is now utterly beyond their control, or the control of anyone else. It has built up a momentum of its own. If evidence exists that the President is implicated, or if evidence exists that will make the President appear implicated, it is going to come out.

If no such evidence exists, Mr. Nixon will be able to complete his term in fairly good form. Of course he will have been weakened politically, and will have a more refractory Congress to deal with than before. In this scenario, contrary to the usual analysis, the worst thing he could do would be to fuzz his differences with the Democrats, either by changing his policies or by erecting a kind of "coalition government." For the foreseeable future, the Republican party has lost an asset it has had in many recent elections at all levels: the image of providing clean, competent government by comparison with the "grubby" Democrats. If the G.O.P. and its leaders cannot convince voters that its issue positions are significantly different from those of the Democrats, as well as better for Middle America, then the party will be left with nothing to say.

If, on the other hand, evidence appears that implicates the President in the eyes of most Americans, then the conduct of Government through Jan. 20, 1977, would be exceedingly difficult if not impossible.

As a conservative, I see a danger even now that the President will go out of his way to achieve attention-getting agreements with Secretary Brezhnev at next month's conference, most specifically an arms-limitation pact that would endanger American interests more than would be the case if Watergate had never happened. By the same token, liberals will be unable to repress the fear that Watergate will cause the President at some point to move radically in the opposite direction, to foment an overseas crisis in the hope of regaining the national unity that Watergate has shattered.

And that is precisely the point. If the Watergate investigation ends with an overwhelming impression of Presidential guilt, that impression will shadow everything Mr. Nixon does or says in the remainder of his term. The result will be either Presidential impotence or national anxiety, or perhaps an unstable mixture of the two. This would be intolerable.

Jeffrey Bell, formerly Capitol Hill director of the American Conservative Union, is a fellow at the Institute of Politics at Harvard.