

Pucksters, Great and Not So Great

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

The balding, crewcut man Senator Sam found wandering in Lafayette Park across the street from the White House was suffering from such terrible memory loss that it was days before his identity could be established. The man did remember he'd first come to Washington in the beginning of 1969, but he couldn't recall meeting anybody here or talking to anyone, although he said he was positive he'd been spending his time with many very high-class people of great integrity and leadership.

The amnesiac had no wallet or credit cards and might never have been identified if it had not been discovered that he was carrying two spools of recording tape in his pockets. The tapes were blank but they did serve to refresh the man's impaired memory somewhat, as Dr. Dash, Senator Sam's personal physician, likes to say.

The doctor diagnosed the cause of the man's loss of memory as a malignant nixonoma exerting paralyzing pressure on the central watergate of the brain. The disease, which is referred to in the literature as Haldeman's Syndrome, is characterized by massive memory loss, frequently accompanied by flashes of self-righteousness and an occasional, unaccountable moment of brilliantly lucid recall.

In one of the man's moments of remission when, as if by miraculous intervention, his memory was restored to him, he said, "Early in the campaign period I agreed with an idea . . . to set up a man functioning independently of the White House for the purpose of generating for our side the same kind of campaign activities that were so ably carried out over the years for Democratic candidates and McGovern in 1972 by Dick Tuck, a man who has been widely praised by political writers as a political prankster, whose basic stock in trade is embarrassing Republican

candidates by activities that have been regarded as clever and acceptable parts of our political tradition."

This wasn't the first time that one of the neurological cases who've sacrificed their intellects by working in the White House for their country has mentioned this Dick Tuck fellow. Gordon Strachan, Haldeman's step 'n' fetch it, had the clouds of his forgetfulness part long enough to remember they decided to buy themselves a "Dick-Tuck-type capability" component for campaign input on which they could all sign off in point of fact.

To which the original Dick Tuck, on whom the White House Horrors are blamed, exclaims, "My God! They should have given the contract to Lockheed."

Tuck, for all his pernicious practical joking, has escaped the disorders of the central nervous system that make it so difficult for a Haldeman to remember or a Segretti to talk. Of course, when the great political Puckster was pulling his gags on Goldwater and Nixon he didn't use false names and disguises. "I took credit for what I did. I demanded it," he said the other day, when called to the phone from an Aspen, Colo., tennis court.

The only thing anonymous or secretive about Tuck is where he used to do his drinking, a place called the No Name Bar in Sausalito, Calif. He still takes his mail and telephone messages there and reports that just the other day, "The FBI stopped into the No Name to inquire after me, but all they said was, 'He always pays his bar bills.'"

Still, if the FBI is diligent, they could come up with something on the Puckster. While it is true that Tuck didn't have hundreds of thousands in cash and strings of underground operatives, he does confess that Steve Smith, the Kennedy brother-in-law, did once, "give me two 50-cent pieces in a brown paper bag." He also admits to gaining entrance to the Republican Convention in

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Miami by allowing himself to be swept into the area in a swirl of spontaneously demonstrating youths for Agnew.

Perhaps drinking in a bar whose proprietors lack the energy to give it a name saved Tuck from "running it into the ground," as he once phrased it to one of the Horribles who couldn't understand why people don't think they're funny too. Although the picture of Haldeman und Ehrlichman and the rest of those grim klutzes sitting around trying to think of somebody funny to hire is not without satiric possibilities.

But now with the rear-end illumination of Senator Sam's famous lightning bug we can see that, after having essayed wit and failed, they turned in despair to a life of crime, where they did display a degree of comic talent. It is, after all, a high order of humorous irony to have Ehrlichman in Washington bemoaning the local contempt for family life while some Ulasewicz-like, ex-flatfoot on his payroll is up in New York, in an apartment with velvet wallpaper and fur rugs, trying to seduce the panties off Catholic virgins while another high-minded, dedicated White House type is in the closet trying to take pictures so they can run the badger game and get the goods on Teddy.

If you'd been mixed up in a mess like that, you'd come down with amnesia too.