

Reflections on What We Now Know

Elsewhere on this page today, Chalmers Roberts has recorded one man's perception of 37 days of televised Watergate hearings. We were particularly struck by his observation that the hearings demonstrated "how much difference there is between the schoolbook view of the presidency and the actuality of the administration of Richard Nixon." For after 37 viewing days—part drama, part education and part ordeal—people must be asking themselves what it all proved and how we are any better or worse off or more or less learned for our experience. And in this connection, it does seem to us that one of the more notable contributions of the first 37 days of the Ervin committee hearings has been the insight they afforded into the workings of Mr. Nixon's government.

A lot has been made of the barbaric idiom in which these men communicated with one another, a sort of cross between gangsterese and the most leaden bureaucratic forms—James Cagney as GS-7. But the inevitable jokes do not tell it all. For this language is insidious and destructive. It camouflages meaning and encourages self-deception, sparing those who use it the necessity of acknowledging—even to themselves—the implications of what they are doing. And it was with the help of this strange currency that witness after witness got into trouble, so far as we can tell, without quite noticing it. But language, for all its importance, was only a tool. It made the criminal and improper activities more comfortable to pursue, but it did not account for them. What did was a narrow, almost idiotic view of priority and value, one that rested on a weird perception of Mr. Nixon's presidency.

From the bland young men to their order-giving elders, from the lowly "wiremen" and operatives to the high priests of the White House staff, the Ervin committee witnesses conveyed the idea that the Nixon government thought of itself not as a normal and legitimate administration to which power had been entrusted by the voters, but rather as some sort of embattled and endangered junta whose hold on power was continuously at risk. They bugged the "enemy"—but they also bugged themselves and one another. Internal "loyalty" was the highest value and that meant loyalty to little more than Mr. Nixon's "interests" as defined by men who were unable to distinguish between running for office and actually *being* in office, between seeking power and exercising it. For men who saw themselves less as custodians of a public trust than as commandos securing a constantly threatened beachhead, what followed was perhaps inevitable: everyone was suspect—and anything went.

The result was twofold, so far as behavior in office was concerned. Coercion came into style as a perfectly acceptable manner of enforcing the official will. So did utter indifference to the integrity of public institutions

and instrumentalities—from the Secret Service to the courts to the CIA. All was subordinated to the large claims of a tiny purpose. If we were to cite but one example of this kind of thinking, which emerged in the course of the Ervin committee hearings, it would be two paragraphs from one of those captured documents entered into the record—a memorandum from Alexander P. Butterfield to H. R. Haldeman concerning the fired Pentagon cost analyst, A. Ernest Fitzgerald, who got his comeuppance for speaking out frankly on cost overruns that were draining the taxpayer's wallet. Thus, the 1970 memorandum from Mr. Butterfield to Mr. Haldeman: *

Fitzgerald is no doubt a top-notch cost expert, but he must be given very low marks in loyalty; and after all, loyalty is the name of the game.

And again:

We should let him bleed, for a while at least. Any rush to pick him up and put him back on the federal payroll will be tantamount to an admission of earlier wrongdoing on our part.

We surmise that in the cold light of the Watergate hangover, these and other attitudes struck by the offenders at the height of their power must seem to many of them as misguided and incredible as they seem to everyone else. And we surmise, too, that, for some of these men whose lives have been very nearly ruined, the order of the day must be introspection and retrospection—a backward search for the moment (God help us, "the point in time") when the slide from sense and the junking of legal and moral values began. For what singularly characterizes "Watergate behavior" as it has been described in the testimony of the Senate committee's phase I witnesses, is the systematic crossing of those real, if invisible, boundaries that divide decent political behavior from that which is indecent, from that which is criminal, exploitative and anti-democratic.

Schoolyard bullies are generally bigger than they are brave. Similarly, government bullies appear to have used the instruments and powers of officialdom to coerce when they couldn't persuade and to seek unfair advantage over those whom they senselessly feared. The temptation, given the mindset of the offenders, must have been great. And therein lies a lesson for us all. For the Watergate 500, as the perpetrators are known to the bumper-sticker set, did not invent the cut corner or the expedient decision or the slippery slope rationale for patently wrong behavior. And they do not have a monopoly on them now. But they stand as a chilling and dramatic example of where the indulgence of such weaknesses can lead. They will have done us all a favor if we note their story well.

* See:

NYTimes 2 Aug 73, p. 20, col. 2
 WXPost, editorial, 12 Aug 73
 NYTimes 19 Sep 73, Ripley