

ERWIN D. CANHAM



Putting Watergate Behind Us Does Not Justify New Cover-Up

Having traveled around the country a little lately, I am well aware of how weary the American people are of what is called Watergate. Sometimes they are bored. Often they are frustrated because they don't know what to do about the situation. Instinctively, they do not like baiting the President of the United States. They shrink from sensation.

But just as the publicity tends to die down, something new seems always to happen that cannot be ignored. So it was with the panel of experts' testimony on the tampered tapes and its sequels. This was no piece of investigative reporting. The news media did not cook up the story.

A former White House official, a thoroughly responsible man still holding a high post, testified that conversations in the executive offices were taped; the district court and the Senate committee felt they needed access to the tapes to tell who was lying; White House officials themselves admitted there was a serious gap in what seemed to be the most significant tape; then a committee of experts, partially nominated by the White House, officially testified in court that there had been some kind of tampering.

SUCH NEWS CANNOT be ignored or dismissed. And so the dreary process of the Watergate investigation protracts and there is nothing the news media can do to relieve the public mood. Many of us, too, would like to put the focus on other things. There are great issues, at home and abroad, which merit careful coverage and analysis.

But Watergate is not finished, cannot be finished by wishing it away.

Soon there will be news nobody can ignore from Leon Jaworski, the special prosecutor. Before long the Ervin Committee, in the hands of two very able and disinterested counsel, will create news.

So, folks, we are in for it. None of us, newspeople or citizens, can turn our backs on the facts. Indeed, we need to know more than has yet been unearthed. Who tampered with the tapes? What is the truth about the alleged spying on Henry Kissinger's activities in the White House by some individuals in the Pentagon? There is still analysis to come from

the Internal Revenue Service on the president's income tax returns.

THE NEWS MEDIA will not be popular when they cover all this legitimate news. They will be accused of creating or distorting the situation. But our duty is clear. We must cover what happens, dig for whatever of important relevance we can find, and analyze it carefully and honestly. One of the criticisms of the media most often advanced by the Nixon loyalists is that we didn't do as good a job of digging as we should have done in the administrations of Lyndon Johnson or John Kennedy, or in the tragic personal experience of Edward Kennedy.

We could have done more. Indeed, I am sure that it would have been useful to explore the private finances of President Johnson, although apparently his fortunes were largely built up while he was still in the Senate. There might have been harder digging into Chappaquiddick, although plenty of news people tried very hard to get at additional facts and did not succeed. If there was a cover-up there, it worked.

A more searching probe of the 1960 voting, especially in Illinois and Texas, would have been beneficial. Part of this probing was turned off by Richard Nixon himself when he asked an investigative reporter to go no further because he believed the upset of an American presidential election would do the nation great harm.

BUT IF OUR CRITICS accuse us of not digging hard enough in or into the remote past, it hardly justifies saying we should not dig today.

When Vice President Ford and many others urged us to get Watergate over quickly, they arouse much sympathy all around. But they should not justify a slipshod job, an overhasty drawing of conclusions. Even the investigation of impeachment issues should not be done so speedily as to preclude necessary care.

It will be a great day when Watergate is behind us. But this can only happen when everything important is known and evaluated.