

Richard of Watergate

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Book World

THEY COULD NOT TRUST THE KING: Nixon,
Watergate and the American People. By William V.
Shannon

(Collier/Macmillan, 199 pp., \$4.95)

A full century elapsed between the day Richard III lost his horse and crown at Bosworth Field and the time the event was memorialized in literature by Shakespeare.

The Nixon dammerung is now only in its second year and the flow of Watergate literary enterprise already threatens to become a glut on the market. There has been a Watergate coloring book, Watergate doggerel, a bedside Watergate and a serious effort at instant historical analysis. Now there appears a photographic chronicle with commentary.

Richard III is such an inviting comparison. The tougher things got the

cooler he got. He was not a man to jump ship. He stayed the course and fought. He thrived on crisis and also displayed a deft hand at suppression of evidence (though it was two missing princes rather than two missing tapes).

Of Richard Nixon it can only be said that the story is not yet complete. While the end may be near it is not in sight. The villainies, such as they were, have not emerged fully, still obscured in a tangle of perjury, manipulated evidence and lawyer-tailored testimony.

Still, one wonders if Shakespeare would not have found a certain succulence in the metrics and imagery of the Tragedy of Watergate, such as John Ehrlichman on L. Patrick Gray III ("... Let him twist slowly, slowly in the wind.")

The stuff of high drama is embedded in the events of Watergate; let the purists argue whether Richard Nixon can properly claim tragic stature since the operative flaw was ours (the electorate's), not his.

Watergate, as Shannon writes, "is a unique scandal.

It differs in kind from earlier political scandals that involved outsiders trying to corrupt members of the government with money or valuable gifts. Instead, it is a conspiracy by insiders to crush their political opposition and maintain themselves in power..."

Watergate surely was a conspiracy but I would question whether its uniqueness was in the concept or the methods. The powers of the presidency and the executive branch when Richard Nixon assumed the office had been expanded to unprecedented scale.

This was best exemplified in the President's effort, observed as he was with national security and political unrest, to establish a centralized domestic intelligence surveillance program in 1970 coupled with "enemies lists" upon which



Photo from the book
John Ehrlichman: "... Let him (Gray) twist slowly, slowly in the wind."

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Sen. Sam Ervin . . . and Watergate through the prism of the Senate Watergate Committee hearings.

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the power of the state would be targeted.

It would be unfair to the incumbent President, however, to ignore the tendencies toward secret surveillance and governmental criminality carried out in the name of national security during preceding administrations. J. Edgar Hoover's anti-subversive operations during the late 1960s presumed an enemies list too and for sheer disregard of due process rivaled many of Watergate's national security excesses.

The underlying issue of Watergate is, in my opinion, the emerging profile of a national security state that threatens to break the bonds of constitutional restraint that defines our public freedoms. This is a process that began long before Watergate I was carried out in the Nixon administration which, it becomes evident, had so little to fear.

This book tries to tell the story of Watergate through

the prism of the Senate Watergate Committee hearings in the words of the witnesses and their unsparingly photographed faces. The one face that is missing is that of the President, who is at the center of the vortex.

But Watergate is essentially a drama of the Amreican presidency and the unprecedented concentration of state power that lies at his fingertips ("I can walk into my office, pick up the telephone and in 20 minutes 70-million people will be dead," Mr. Nixon told an audience of southern Democratic congressmen at a

White House dinner last Nov. 15.).

As for the President himself and the emotional furries that must be besieging him at this moment, little is known as he shrinks further and further away from public visibility.

When Shakespeare's Richard III emerged on the stage he had been turned into a villainous caricature in the fish-eye lens of Tudor hatred toward him. The definitive book about Watergate and Richard Nixon will have to wait several years, but let us hope it will be in this century.