

## Books of The Times

*Disdain Approaching Sympathy*

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMAN-HAUPT

AN AMERICAN LIFE: *One Man's Road to Watergate*. By Jeb Stuart Magruder. 338 pages. Illustrated. Atheneum. \$10.

One expects to disdain Jeb Stuart Magruder's "An American Life: One Man's Road to Watergate." (After all, what has someone so relatively low on the Watergate totem pole to offer, except excuses for himself?) And for a while at least, one's disdain holds sway. Indeed, how else is one to respond to the moral flabbiness Mr. Magruder evinces while recounting his youth and early career? How is one to react to his admission that he discovered early in life how it was for him to "wangle" his way with his charm and good looks? Or to his statement, explaining why he felt a certain falling out between his college fraternity and its national office "was ridiculous," that "I couldn't see now it was going to dishonor Phi Delta Theta to have one Jew in its Williams chapter"? Or to the too feeble objections he raises to jobs he held as a young man that involved manufacturing faulty merchandise or selling goods by illegitimate means?



United Press International

Jeb Stuart  
Magruder

And how else but with disdain is one to react to the profoundly superficial manner in which Mr. Magruder embraced his political calling? To the shallowness of his philosophy, which is summed up in its totality by the statements: "As a college student, majoring in political science, I had learned I was more comfortable with the conservative point of view than with the liberal. I wanted to see less big government and more individual reliance."? To the longing for status, power, glamour and the approval of his superiors that seems to have moved him to strive and succeed in the Nixon Administration? And to his concern for the images and shadows of Mr. Nixon's programs, rather than their realities and substance?

**Success by Any Means**

Judging from the first half of "An American Life," Jeb Stuart Magruder grew up as a paradigm of the youth of the nineteen-fifties — outer-directed, morally aimless and eager to succeed by whatever standards that prevailed. He leaped aboard the Nixon stateship from the cosmetics industry (where, for a time, he owned a sales and manufacturing concern while simultaneously working as a cosmetics buyer for a chain of department stores—a situation whose potential for conflict of interest he doesn't bother to comment upon). Working as a Special Assistant to the President, he would be required to rig telegram campaigns in support of Mr. Nixon's controversial decisions. As the man in charge of planning for the Committee to Re-elect the President, he would help to engineer the cover-up of the Watergate break-in. Outer-directedness, cosmetics, cover-up: it is all of a piece. And so a reader exercises his disdain.

Yet, curiously enough, one's disdain begins to fade after a while. Gradually, the pattern of Mr. Magruder's career becomes so insistent that it begins to seem as if he were saying, "Given my background, the era in which I came of age, and the circumstances of my upbringing, what else can you expect but that given the right sort of pressures, I was doomed to break the law." While such a message would seem thoroughly repugant if it were articulated consciously, it remains so subtle that one doubts, whether Mr. Magruder was aware of delivering it. And considering its apparent lack of calculation, one begins to feel a certain sympathy for him.

Of course, "An American Life" is intended to convey many other things besides a portrait of Mr. Magruder's character. It is also a coherent and dramatic inside account of exactly how Watergate happened. It is an anthology of lively character sketches that throw interesting new light on the people in the Nixon Administration whom Mr. Magruder admires (John N. Mitchell, Egil Krogh Jr. and Frederick LaRue), on the people he has mixed feelings about (Richard M. Nixon, H. R. Haldeman and Martha Mitchell), and on the people he doesn't admire at all (Charles W. Colson, Ronald L. Ziegler, Robert H. Finch, and G. Gordon Liddy).

**'Best-Run Campaign in History'**

It is a somewhat desperate attempt to rescue from oblivion the positive accomplishments of the Committee to Re-elect the President (Mr. Magruder believes that the 1972 Nixon campaign remains "the best-planned, best organized, best-run Presidential campaign in American history" and that it will be a positive guideline for the future). And it is an indictment of the guilty (including himself) and an attempt to exonerate the innocent (on the question of the President's involvement, Mr. Magruder fudges somewhat: on the one hand, he states, "I know nothing to indicate that Nixon was aware in advance of the plan to break into the Democratic headquarters . . . [but] I would suspect that once the burglars were arrested, Nixon immediately demanded and got the full story, and that thereafter he kept in close personal touch with the cover-up operation, through Mitchell and Haldeman"; on the other hand, he creates an overwhelming impression that nothing, but nothing, was done by anyone in the Administration without express orders from the boss).

Still, what remains most arresting about this continually interesting book is the problem of Mr. Magruder's character, and the unusual degree to which, intentionally or not, he has connected it to his conduct. Some readers will doubtless dismiss this as meaningless—another Magruder exercise in salesmanship—on the grounds that explanations for human behavior are nothing, while the capacity to make abstract ethical decisions is all. Other readers will be touched by the unwittingly honest portrait he has drawn of himself, on the grounds that there is a distinction between explanations and excuses. As for me, I found myself tending toward the latter view, since I don't believe any of us can escape our histories. When all was said and done, my disdain melted into something like understanding.