



A Parable of the Watergate Horror

Joseph Alsop

THE MOST hopeful way of explaining the Watergate horror, as it is now developing, is by an old New England story.

More than 40 years ago, there was an impoverished remnant of a formerly grand family in Boston. They lived behind closed shutters, in a big, formerly pretentious old house.

The cast of characters was brother and sister, both in late middle age, and a mother well past 80 and blind for many decades.

★ ★ ★

THE BROTHER and sister had always been incestuously in love. Their incest and their guilt made them hate the light of day. Their blind mother further had no means of knowing the hour of the day except for the street sounds.

Year by year, therefore, the sister and brother changed the times of rising and going to bed until their mother was being awakened and was having her breakfast well after sundown, with all else in proportion.

The interiors of the house itself were shrouded with newspapers, except for the inhabitants' accustomed chairs and the pathways across the carpets leading to those chairs. If anyone was allowed to pay a call, it was for "morning coffee"—at ten in the evening.

Yet the blind old lady had no notion she was not leading a blind woman's normal life, lovingly attended by a faithful son and daughter.

Sometimes she merely wondered why Boston's traffic was only to be heard "at night." She was talking, of course, about the city's daytime noises.

This is a true story, heard from the blind old lady's grandson. It is also a parable, although a much exaggerated parable, of the Watergate horror.

The points here are simple enough, and instead of incest, they involve love of power. The President, to begin with, is a man both abnormally reclusive and abnormally intelligent.

He does not like the Oval Office all other presidents have loved, because it is too open and too airy. He does not like more than a minimum of human contact. He likes to get the facts, brood upon those facts, and then reach his decisions.

Until just the other day, therefore, he secluded himself in Washington in his hideaway in the Executive Office Building, in a way that has never been known in any other president.

★ ★ ★

TRAFFIC NOISES at seemingly strange hours were not even there to raise questions in the President's mind. He has always believed the press and television were unjust. Hence he has never believed what he read or heard.

Without exception, those who had access to the President, and above all, those who controlled access to the President, were persons with three uniting characteristics.

None of them had any sweaty, practical political experience. All of them suffered, in greater or lesser degree, from a special kind of political tunnel-vision.

They all liked the exercise of power, even though they knew so little of politics. In these circumstances, the Watergate horror becomes comprehensible.