

Sweating It Out Once Again

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

NIGHTMARE: The Underside of the Nixon Years. By J. Anthony Lukas. 626 pages. Viking, \$15.

Why read still another book about Watergate? That was a question I kept asking myself throughout the first third or so of J. Anthony Lukas's "Nightmare: The Underside of the Nixon Years"—an investigatory report whose genesis filled two complete issues of The New York Times Magazine and would have filled still a third had not President Nixon cut short the impeachment process by resigning. True, Mr. Lukas seemed to be putting flesh, and even scars and warts, on the underside of the Nixon years. He was giving us, for instance, an unusually graphic account of the plumbers' raid on the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist (when questioned during his reconnaissance of



Ellen Levine

J. Anthony Lukas

Dr. Lewis Fielding's office by the cleaning Howard Hunt Jr. coolly addressed her in Spanish and talked her into admitting himself and G. Gordon Liddy with a pass-key).

A Lucid Picture

Mr. Lukas was developing the most lucid picture I for one have yet come across of how the White House's news-leak-and-telephone-tap syndrome gradually developed, as well as who in particular got tapped and why (in the notes to this chapter Mr. Lukas even includes for the convenience of future researchers of the House Judiciary's reports the F.B.I. letter code for the various wiretap targets). He was elaborating a theory of what the plumbers were after when they tried to establish surveillance on the Democratic National Committee offices in the Watergate complex (among other things, the plumbers may have been trying to find out if the Democratic national chairman, Lawrence F. O'Brien, knew anything about the \$100,000 allegedly funneled from Howard R. Hughes to Mr. Nixon through his friend Charles G. Rebozo). He was even saying that "no hard evidence has ever been adduced to connect [Arthur] Bremer with the White House," as if to suggest that the soft evidence is another matter.

The Awful Comedy

Yet I still kept asking myself why I should read another book on Watergate, because for all the lucidity and detail of "Nightmare" there was really nothing of substance here I hadn't read or heard before. Then, about a third of the way into "Nightmare," beginning with the chapter called "Cover-Up," my peevishness began to let up. Here, for example, was the account of how the F.B.I. immediately traced the cash found in possession of the Watergate burglars back to the Finance Committee for the Re-election of the President, and

how the White House was then put in the position of having to simultaneously encourage and discourage Acting Director L. Patrick Gray 3d. Perhaps I'd been asleep when this episode came up during the Congressional hearings, but never before had the awful comedy come alive in such living color.

Here, for another example, was the still incredible story of how the cover-up unraveled—especially the episode in which President Nixon met with Assistant Attorney General Henry E. Petersen during the time of John W. Dean's negotiations for immunity with the Justice Department, and with the upper hand enlisted Mr. Petersen's aid in protecting the Presidency, while with the under hand he picked Mr. Petersen's brain to find out how much Mr. Dean was telling ("Henry . . . You've got to believe me, I'm after the truth, even if it hurts me. But, believe me, it won't.") There is little question why such passages come across more dramatically than they ever have before: for the first time the various versions of the White House tape transcripts have been taken apart and pieced together so we can clearly understand them.

From this point on there was never any question as to why I was reading Mr. Lukas's reconstruction. Very simply, the nightmare was happening once more—the revelations concerning San Clemente and Key Biscayne, the downfall of Vice President Agnew, the shock of the Saturday night massacre, the agony of the impeachment process, and the final catharsis of the resignation. Indeed it was happening as if for the first time, because we were no longer on the outside trying to make sense of the confusion within. Mr. Lukas has taken every scrap of information available—every newspaper and magazine article, every book, every piece of the official record, as well as interviews he has managed to conduct with whatever key participants were available—and pieced them into an event that never existed before. And willy-nilly one is compelled to experience it.

Why It Happened

Looking back, I can still see good reasons for my initial resistance to his account. Built into Mr. Lukas's construction is a thesis that explains why Watergate happened. (It combines Mr. Nixon's personal insecurity with the radical ferment of the 1960's, which led to a genuine fear on the part of the Administration that it was in danger of losing the 1972 election.) But it's not a thesis of large enough perspective to place the Nixon Administration in the broader sweep of 20th-century political history—a thesis of the order, say, of what Jonathan Schell offers in his recently published "The Time of Illusion" (in which he argues, perhaps too forgivingly, that Mr. Nixon's behavior was a function of nuclear diplomacy). And at this late date one hungers more for an overarching thesis than a re-creation, however compelling, of the sordidness of Watergate.

Still, Mr. Lukas's account remains irresistible. And even if one prefers not to be tempted by it, it deserves to be put on the shelf of one's library for being the most detailed and coherent account of Watergate written to date.