

The Watergate Factor

"The system works," everybody said when Watergate was over, but there must be a lot of Republicans who are wondering these days whether in fact it does.

For here we are getting ready for another national referendum, and the party which gave us Watergate is about to offer its members a choice between the man who pardoned Richard Nixon and one who defended him all the way.

You'd think that Republicans might be demanding someone who insisted on letting it all hang out, for example, Sen. Lowell Weicker of Connecticut—who nearly succeeded during the Watergate hearings in turning indignation to eloquence.

Or somebody who was a star investigator, for example, Sen. Howard Baker of Tennessee—who managed to avoid getting trapped during the hearings and came out with his honor intact.

Or some innocent bystander. Is there the slightest hope for that stolid figure of common sense and honesty, Sen. Charles Mathias of Maryland? Apparently not. What Republicans are going to get if they don't get Gerald Ford is Ronald Reagan, and Reagan's record on Watergate looks like that of a man who is trying to appeal to the hard-core Nixon loyalists, that "he was lynched" crowd.

A look through the back files of the newspapers is convincing. In April of 1973, Reagan said: "The venality that has been assigned to this (Watergate) could destroy some lives and the futures of some men. America's reaction is not one of shock so much as expecting this to happen in campaigns."

Later he defined the abuses as the excesses of "spies" who should not be considered criminals because they are not "criminals at heart."

He noted that those who did "stupid things were appointive persons whom

Nixon should divorce." As late as June of 1974, he was saying that Nixon's detractors have turned to "vague areas like morality" because they lacked criminal evidence.

From a narrow political standpoint, perhaps it is possible to excuse Gerald Ford, who was touring the country making similar statements when the end came. Mr. Ford was Vice President and doubtless, in a kind of tunnel vision of the job, he placed loyalty ahead of common sense and loyalty to his boss ahead of loyalty to the country.

But Reagan had no such excuses. He was not in line for Nixon's job and he might at least have held his peace as Nelson Rockefeller was doing at the time. Weicker, Baker and Mathias, on the other hand, were speaking out. Is there to be no reward within the Republican Party for those who were right?

Democratic candidates are not saying much about the Watergate crimes. "The party that gave us Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew" is a line which is almost certain to become stock during the year ahead. But in unconscious common agreement, Democrats are waiting. If Gerald Ford is the nominee he can expect to hear a lot about the fact that he is President by grace of Richard Nixon and that he pardoned his benefactor.

Ronald Reagan will have problems, too. That mansion in California, 37 rooms with a five-car garage, a swimming pool, tennis courts, a movie room, sauna and temperature-controlled wine cellar, is one of them. The present California governor refuses to live in the place and wants to turn it into a rest home for the aged or a day-care center.

But Watergate will hurt Reagan, too. Only a Republican who would never think of describing morality as "a vague area" will escape the sting.

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