

Harriet Van Horne

Dita's Ordeal

--A Shocker

Propped up in her hospital bed, tubes in her nose and an agony of pain and anxiety in her eyes, Mrs. Dita Beard was a picture to tear the heart. She's in a trap that's as cruel, in its way, as the razor-edged pincers that ensnare small creatures in the wild.

The ordeal of Dita Beard is particularly shocking to those of us who have never had to skulk and pounce and lacerate to get through another day in the corporate jungle.

We pity Mrs. Beard because her desperation has forced her to sell the truth to serve the hour. But we may also feel grateful to her because she has opened a trapdoor that covered a dark pit of things so rank and gross that the stench is now offending all good citizens.

With denials and counter-denials filling the air, Mrs. Beard's ordeal begins to echo those chilling tales of what happens to social critics and free thinkers in the Soviet Union. Those not declared insane and packed off to asylums are made to recant publicly.

For her sins, Mrs. Beard has been branded irrational, emotional and a bad drinker. Her famous memo on the alleged ITT gift of \$400,000 to the GOP national convention has been wholly repudiated by ITT and partially repudiated by Mrs. Beard.

Those pious deacon types in the Justice Department, so zealous in upholding the law every time there's a peace march, now have been exposed as liars and fixers.

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BUT IF THERE EMERGES out of the clogged sink of ITT deals, bribes and dubious strategies a new public awareness of how economic power becomes political power—crushing the common man in the process—then Dita Beard's ordeal has not been in vain.

There was an almost cinematic drama in the pilgrimage of six senators to Mrs. Beard's bedside. And there was reassurance that fair play exists in government when Sen. Philip Hart announced that the Judiciary Committee was terminating its questions as an act of simple "decency."

A further touch of cinema was offered by Mrs. Beard when she suffered — at a crucial and telling point — a sudden onset of pain. The testimony offered at that point had to do with a White House call to ITT allegedly to check up on the contribution it was expecting for the convention. In that sudden seizure we may hear the anguished wail of a sick, frightened woman, "My God, what am I saying?"

It is neither cynical nor disrespectful at this juncture to wonder: Was ITT putting pressure on the Justice Department to call off its anti-trust suit or was the White House subtly badgering ITT to fatten up its campaign contribution?

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THE ORDEAL OF DITA BEARD and the showing up of the Justice Department would not be taking place were we not living under a system that condoned corporate giantism, aye, even encouraged it, by easy laws and cold indifference to the social consequences.

Even a casual reading of American history since the Civil War tells us that bigness, beyond a certain size, is neither efficient nor honorable. Conglomerates become unmanageable. Repeated mergers are motivated, not by a desire to help the working man or the average stockholder, but by the greed and lust of a few men.

A classic example is the old U.S. Steel trust, half of whose capitalization was water. Once the trust was established (with common stock having no backing of any sort) the Interstate Commerce Commission reported a marked increase in train derailments. Farmers complained that fence wire was no good. In 10 years, steelworkers laboring 10 hours a day earned a total of \$12 million. Over the same period, some \$435 million were added to the trust's assets.

With the media under attack by the Administration, we have cause to be grateful that ITT's purchase of the ABC network was blocked by the Justice Department a few years ago.