

A Persistent, Perceptive Eye on the Presidency

THE THIRD YEAR OF THE NIXON WATCH

By John Osborne
Illustrated by Pat Oliphant
Liveright, 216 pp., \$6.95

Reviewed by STEPHEN HESS

Why is it that a liberal reporter, whose writings appear in a left-leaning journal of modest circulation, consistently produces the most insightful and balanced commentary on a Republican President and a conservative administration? The question is prompted by the collection of John Osborne's 1971 articles from *The New Republic*. (Osborne cognoscenti should also be aware that Liveright has reissued as a single paperback volume *The First Two Years of the Nixon Watch*, \$3.75.)

There is no doubt that Osborne is a graceful writer, given to some delightful turns of phrase, and this helps. Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler, in Osborne's prose, becomes "the President's faithful oral reflector"; Harry Dent is "the President's staff specialist in Southern sensibilities"; and the President himself is "a connoisseur . . . of historic firsts."

Osborne also has the advantage over most of his colleagues of a weekly deadline, which helps, too. In addition to having seven days to think before he leaps to his typewriter, he rarely mistakes a name, date, or fact.

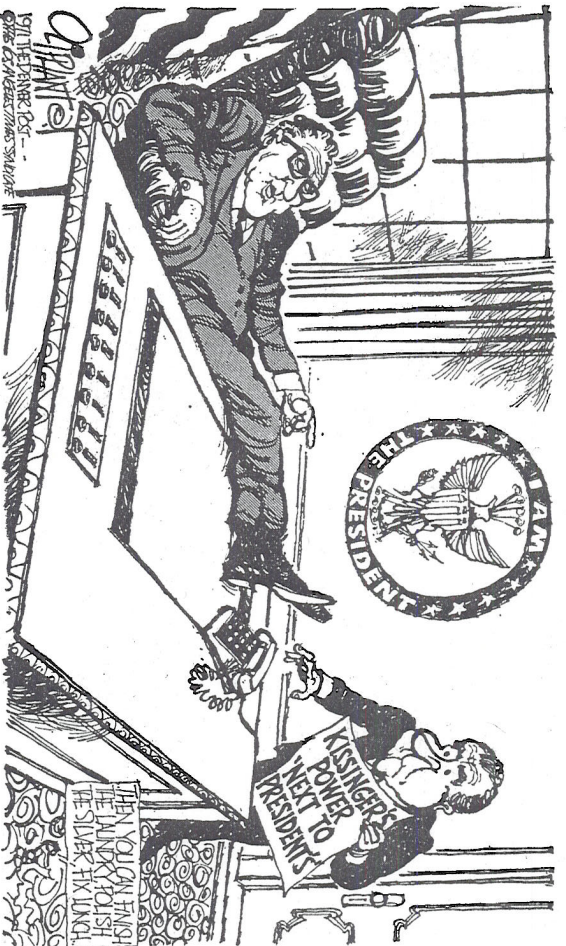
There is a feeling of growth about all of Osborne's work. He is constantly reminding himself that some event, no matter how minor, is "instructive." Here, indeed, is a truly educable man. Nor is he petty: he is without predilection for gossip, unusual for one who reports on the powerful; no grudge-bearing, no impugning of motives is evident in his work, although of late he has been less charitably inclined. Moreover, there is that hint of fallibility, which has its charm; this is not Theodore White groping for instant history. Osborne is no lock-step liberal. He re-

fuses to accept Walter Hickey's appraisal of himself as a much-abused cabinet officer; "I thought and still think," he writes, "that liberal critics of Reinquist's conservatism made asses of themselves"; and he declares "no sympathy" for *The Washington Post* and other "complainers" in their short-lived war against "backgrounders." Yet he finds little to laud in the administration's policies, being particularly critical of its handling of race, and of the Cambodian incursion.

It may say something about the men around Nixon that Osborne, the often searing critic, probably has the best access to the White House staff of any reporter in Washington. But it is equally revealing that whenever he has experienced staff displeasure it is because of some jotting that reflects on the person of Richard Nixon — whether he dyes his hair, whether he uses profanity — rather than because of policy differences.

But what I have mentioned in praise of Osborne could also have been said of at least some of his colleagues. There are other graceful writers, from Tom Wicker on the left to William F. Buckley Jr. on the right. Other reporters do "in-depth" columns and "Sunday pieces" so that the advantage of a weekly deadline may be more apparent than real. Certainly others are hard-working, honest, and above pettiness. Ultimately what sets Osborne's work apart, in my judgment, is his "beat." He is virtually the only reporter in the nation who covers the presidency as an institution and who pays special attention on a regular and systematic basis to the structure, mechanics, functioning, and personnel of the institutional White House. His beat, in short, is the processes of decision-making at the highest level. And as more and more power devolves on the office of the presidency, as presidential staff mushroom, and as "executive privilege" becomes a battle-cry, the need for this type of reportage not only grows proportionally but becomes a veritable necessity.

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COMES THE THAW . . .

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