

Watergate Theories

Here with a collection of reflections and conclusions inspired by an inescapable subject.

Should we Americans, like poor Tom Dooley, hang down our heads and cry?

The question is inspired by a recent article by Gore Vidal in Britain's left-wing New Statesman magazine. There are certain American writers who get a queer thrill out of letting it all hang out, before a British left-intellectual audience, about how horrible America is. Gore Vidal is such a one. Watergate is, of course, his theme.

"I fear," he writes loftily, "the United States has always been a nation of ongoing hustlers from the prisons and disaster areas of old Europe... I do not think that the American system in its present state of decadence is worth preserving. The initial success of the United States was largely acci-

Mr. Alsop writes a weekly column for Newsweek, from which this article is reprinted.

dental. A rich almost empty continent was... exploited by rapacious Europeans who made slaves of Africans and corpses of Indians in the process." And so on.

It is true, of course, that we Americans were lucky to find so much rich and empty land; true that brutality is part of our history (as of almost every country's); true that Watergate is a thoroughly nasty business. It is true too that we Americans are descended from what Europeans consider the lower classes.

But it is also true that the rapacity of the European ruling classes has never been matched here. "The stately homes of England," to cite one example, were built by those who managed to get their hands into the public till up to their armpits. And while "old Europe" was busy perpetuating horrendous social inequalities and inventing such delightful systems of government as Hitlerism and Stalinism, we "ongoing hustlers" have managed for almost two centuries now to keep ourselves a free people. That is what we still are, and although no sensible man is proud of Watergate, that is what Watergate abundantly proves.

No, it really doesn't seem necessary to emulate poor Tom Dooley.

But it may become necessary, if a rather widely held theory is correct. This is the theory that the youngish men who have appeared before the Ervin committee, and those yet to appear, represent the American ruling class of the future. A ruling class tends to share a style, a way of speaking, and a point of view. Jeb Stuart Magruder and John Dean share a style, a sort of bland neatness, and in their slightly more middle-aged way,

so do John Ehrlichman and H. R. Haldeman. They share a way of speaking—an oddly convoluted diction that sounds often like a difficult translation, and pat phrases like "signing on (off)," "brought up to speed on," "in that time frame," "at this point in time," "inoperative."

These people also share a point of view—that the purpose of life is to gain brownie points with the next layer up in the hierarchy, and that questions of right and wrong have nothing to do with the case. According to the theory, people of this sort are beginning wholly to dominate the great American corporations and such ancillary organizations as the big advertising and law firms, where the basic decisions on how Americans live are said to be made. Such people are thus becoming the new American ruling class.

That is the theory. I don't think I believe it. But if it's true, Gore Vidal might, in time, be proved right after all about how horrible America is.

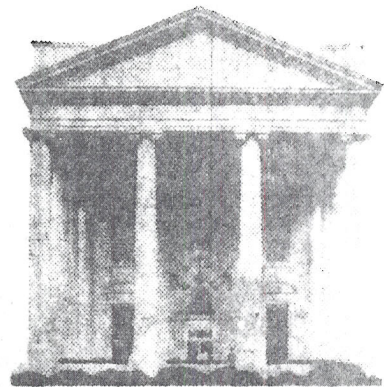
I have a pet theory of my own that may be worth a quick look. It is that "the twilight of the presidency," in George Reedy's phrase, really started

back in 1949, when President Harry Truman had the whole interior of the White House torn out, leaving only the bare walls standing.

In Franklin Roosevelt's day, we Alsops used to be asked to the White House on rare tribal occasions (Mother was Mrs. Roosevelt's first cousin). The White House in those days was like the old house of a rich family, slightly gone to seed. There was a smell of the past in every creak of the stairs, every crack in the plaster, every nick in the wooden mantels. The ghosts of Abraham Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt and James Monroe and Chester A. Arthur and the rest almost visibly stalked the place.

When the insides were torn out of the old place, the past was torn out with them. Marble replaced wood, expensive and meaningless interior decoration replaced the happy jumble of good pieces and bad inherited from past occupants, and no ghosts stalked. The White House is now like a rich South American dictator's effort to compete with European royalty. President Nixon's attempt to dress up the White House cops like comic-opera Swiss guards was the culmination of a process that saw presidents increasingly treated like kings—or South American dictators—rather than like the first citizens of a free country; and because they were treated that way, increasingly behaving that way.

One wonders if Watergate could have happened if the White House still smelled of the American past. For ex-



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ample, could residents of the White House have happily exchanged memos about how to use the federal taxing power to "screw our political enemies," if the ghost of Mr. Lincoln had been breathing down their necks?

Back in 1959, when I was working on an article about Vice President Nixon, I visited his mother, the late Mrs. Francis Nixon, at her house near Whittier, Calif. She looked a lot like her son, ski-jump nose and all, and she was a charming and remarkably good-looking lady. (This may seem a contradiction in terms, but consider Julie Eisenhower.) She was wonderfully proud of her successful son, and she showed me a vast collection of boyhood photographs and other mementos. Then she told me a small story about Richard.

One evening when Richard was about 12, she said, he was sprawled on the floor reading in the papers about the Teapot Dome scandal. "Mother," he said, "do you know what I want to be when I grow up? I want to be an honest lawyer who goes to Washington to help people, not to cheat them."

What has happened to 12-year-old Richard with his 12-year-old idealism? No doubt what happens to all of us, as getting and spending we lay waste our powers—only more so. Yet one can be absolutely certain that Mr. Nixon does not see himself as many of his countrymen see him—as an amoral, power-grabbing politician. One can be almost as certain that he sees himself as changed in no essential way from that idealistic 12-year-old boy. That is the tragedy of Richard Nixon.