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Watergate 'caper' in perspective

Concerning the Watergate caper, a few observations:

1. There is increasing indignation at the use of the word "caper" to describe Watergate. The indignation is one part genuine, one part opportunistic. It is true that as more is discovered about the circumstances surrounding the Watergate affair, the uglier the thing looks. It is one thing to break into an office of a nonsubversive American enterprise for the purpose of listening in on conversations and telephone calls (bad enough). Something else to hire a professional disrupter, as now it is alleged was done, and charge him to forge letters over the signature of Democratic candidates, pose as the candidate's agent for the purpose of calling off meetings, and mixing up schedules. That kind of thing is totalitarian in tendency.

Nicely suspended presumptions

2. Advocates of George McGovern are

William F. Buckley Jr.

doing their very best to proceed on the assumption that the whole of the White House is guilty. They have nicely suspended, during the crucial interval between now and the election, the presumptions they guard so zealously in other situations. We are constrained to speak about the "alleged sky-jacker" even after the jet has gone zooming off to Algeria, a man with a pistol in his hand held to the pilot's head. That man gets to be "alleged," whereas nowadays you will find McGovernites talking quite openly about

"Nixon's" Watergate operation, and "Nixon's" political sabotage agents. One White House staff member is alleged to have told a former colleague on The Washington Post that he himself wrote the letter allegedly written by Senator Muskie that brought on the lachrymose encounter outside the offices of the Manchester New Hampshire newspapers. Read that sentence over again and leave out the alleged, and you have put on your special McGovern lenses.

The most venal versions

3. The same gentlemen who are accepting the most venal versions of what happened are prepared to hold Richard Nixon directly responsible for them. Prof. Kenneth Galbraith, who has been neglecting his economics—an infrequent act of philanthropy—in order to campaign for George McGovern, says it flatly: either Nixon was personally responsible for giving the orders to burglarize Watergate, in which case Nixon should be defeated for moral venality; or if Nixon didn't know about it, he should be defeated for incompetence.

As regards the first part of the proposed

dichotomy: it is at least absurd to suppose that Richard Nixon knew that that kind of thing was going on. The expression "more royalist than the king" defined a relationship that survives in republican societies. Henry II said in a fit of exasperation "Who will rid me of this accursed priest?"—and Henry's Dwight Chapin instantly attended to the assassination of Thomas a Becket.

If it happened that Richard Nixon was overheard to say in a fit of exasperation over, let us say, the burglarized minutes of his cabinet meetings on the subject of Bangladesh: "I wish to hell I knew who is the s.o.b. who is getting our information over to Jack Anderson,"—one can imagine a young staff member deciding to take it upon himself to bug the Democratic headquarters thinking perhaps to identify the guilty party. But the situation would require that he not, repeat not, advise the king what it was that

he intended to do. To say that nobody should be president who permits himself to have on his staff someone who is so resourcefully loyal, is to say that Bertie Wooster should not be permitted to hire Jeeves.

Justice should be done

4. There is no question that justice should be done. Laws against illegal entry and eavesdropping were not written to be ignored. And a realistic view of the situation is that the Watergate set are in for a very tough time. They are no Ellsbergs, for whom half the legal profession in America volunteer their services. These are men whose blood the Democrats want, and whom the Republicans will most anxiously neglect. Compassion is not a political specialty.

But to suggest, (5), that it is appropriate to the crime to defeat Richard Nixon is the most audacious act of proposed highwaymanry of the century. The people of the United States aren't guilty of Watergate. Why should we be punished for Watergate? The American people seem to have made up their minds that a McGovern Administration would be a national affliction. The American people will not turn to masochism in order to avenge the privacy of Larry O'Brien.

Sections marked not in column as carried by SFXaminer 24 Oct 72