

The Watergate: Keeping Track

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

There's been a turnabout in the prevailing view here. Ordinarily the politicians, the higher-level bureaucrats and the journalists in Washington worry themselves about not knowing what's happening back there in America. One of the most damaging things you can say about somebody in this town is that he's out of touch.

Now, however, some people are beginning to worry that America is out of touch with Washington. While the meat prices go up in Chicago and the rest of life stays pretty much the same the feeling of being marooned in a sinister mist is falling on many of us in the capital as we hear people speculate out loud about topics once unthinkable.

The most morbid is the discussion of James W. McCord Jr.'s life expectancy. Sober, experienced people in this city wonder if the singing Waterbugger will live to climb on a witness stand and inculcate those closest to Nixon in the felonies for which McCord has already been convicted. Without bodyguards the man is an easy target but heavy publicity and the fact that out-and-out murder is one crime not yet imputed to the Nixon people may protect him. [may protect him?]

It has come down to that kind of talk as fear grows that the center of organized crime in America may be the Oval Room of the White House. Yet as we sit here the rest of America can't see.

Dishonesty in government, corruption in high places, those are the slogans for facts we've long had with us, and maybe the folks back home are so inured to talk of such things they don't know this isn't the same old stuff. Possibly they don't realize that The Godfather is in for a second term and he thinks the whole family has won a mandate. Thuggery in the White House is after all, a new idea, though probably not a very nice one.

On other days we theorize that there is too much for people to absorb. The Watergate and allied crimes now involve so many people, in so many places, doing so many dirty things, that keeping track of them has become a minor full-time specialty. That would be enough for a citizenry to soak up but there are all the other simple perjuries and fancy speculations, the bagmen with the cash money in the attache cases, the simony, the conspiracy, the veins of scandal fissuring the marble of every hall in government.

See also Jules Witcover,
Washington Post 28 Mar 73.

and Trying to Forget

A man can't hardly understand it, much less believe it. What is a reasonably civilized public to think when the wife of the Attorney General says her husband's strong-arm men threw her down and shot a hypodermic into her when she refused to be related—no, not even by marriage—to what's been going on? Martha Mitchell drugged in her bedroom and the likes of Frank Sinatra socializing with the likes of Henry Kissinger.

Easier to believe Ron Ziegler's cloddish lies, the denials that rest on nothing more than the pompous invocation of "The President." Never President Nixon, but always "The President." Close your eyes a little and slow down your mind Ziegler says, The President or A President could never, would never commit the unlawful acts the growing evidence suggests he did.

His personal lawyer, his official counsel, his appointments secretary and his closest political adviser, they were all in on it, but no, not The President.

Still, there may be a wisdom in the public's absence of reaction. What are we as a people, or as single citizens, going to do if it should come out with incontrovertible proof, if it should come out beyond reasonable doubt that Nixon sat in the White House and directed the commission of a series of crimes and then used the executive branch of the government to obstruct justice in solving them? What do we do then? Refuse to pay our taxes or write our congressmen?

We have no history to fall back on here. Presidents Grant and Harding were never personally implicated in the grand thefts of their close associates. People had an out then; they could always say those two were stupid, or they were naive, but they didn't betray their oath of office. Even Lyndon Johnson, whose financial affairs were dark clouded and questionable as a lesser politician, conducted himself with probity when he came to the final and full power.

Maybe we're better off not knowing. Not to protect Nixon, but to protect ourselves maybe we'd best forget the investigations.

The man's got something like 1,400 more days to serve, and if it's pinned on him personally, every one of them will be fouled. Every day will be a macabre, dishonored irony as he moves from event to event . . . GANG CHIEFTAIN ENTERTAINS POWs . . . RING-LEADER RECEIVES RUSSIAN PREMIER . . . WATERBUG-IN-CHIEF LAUNCHES NEW WAR ON CRIME.

Some people here—and they're not all Democrats or fringy rads—are starting to say that, if it comes to that, he should be impeached. We're still five or six new shockers away from that idea being taken up; but if it should ever get even 150 votes in the House of Representatives, then you'll see the country divide and bleed her ideals away. So maybe America does know what's happening here, and that may be enough for America not to want to know any more.