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Watergate: 'Political Amateur Hour'

The more we learn about the Watergate affair, the more puzzled we become. By "we" I mean those of us who have spent a good deal of time inside Presidential politics. Putting aside the interesting conflict between the administration's devotion to law and order (to say nothing of the "work ethic") and the sequence of events which has led the Acting Director of the FBI to accuse the President's counsel of lying to an agent, what kind of characters would have authorized and lavishly financed that idiotic episode?

The answer that immediately comes to mind is that the Watergate break-in and bugging could only have been sponsored by men who knew less about national politics than I do about astrophysics. In deed, were it not for the intrinsic seriousness of actions which undermine the credibility of our political system, the Watergate caper resembled a fraternity prank. It was simply asinine both in conception and execution.

For this reason I have been convinced from the outset that President Nixon was totally unaware of the scenario. Richard Nixon did not become Representative, Senator,

Vice President, and finally President of the United States through his non-political talents. I think, perhaps naively, that he, and every other candidate for President of the United States in my time, would have blocked it instantly on moral grounds. But beyond that, he would be fully aware of the inherent stupidity of even a successful bugging of the office of Lawrence O'Brien, then the Democratic national chairman.

O'Brien grew up in what might be called the "original sin" school of politics—Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr., dean; Kenneth O'Donnell, student adviser. The first rule one learned in this school was always to assume the worst case: for instance, take for granted the existence of opposition spies in your midst, figure that somebody has bugged the headquarters and that the phones are tapped. (Not by the FBI, the CIA, or any official agency, but by private electronics experts.)

As a consequence of this, any real political business was invariably conducted well outside the office. One would call O'Brien about some ticklish political matter and simply say, "Larry, I think we ought to have a talk. Why don't I drop by in

a half an hour?" Arriving at his office in the Watergate, you would remark on what a lovely day it was and suggest a walk. And as you ambled along the bank of the Potomac, you would get down to business.

I am sure that the Republicans, that is, the real professionals, operate on roughly the same set of assumptions. This sort of atmosphere does have a "chilling effect," but one adapts to it quickly.

The Watergate operation was, in other words, a political Amateur Hour. And the reason it obviously received support from the White House personnel is that the Nixon White House is staffed with political amateurs. Nobody in Mr. Nixon's top echelon has ever been elected Tree Warden (an office on our Massachusetts ballot last month) and they look like the boys from Delta Sigma Chi. But Watergate was not a fraternity prank. One cannot with impunity tamper with the electoral process, and any efforts by the White House to cover up staff involvement must be ruthlessly disposed of. The doctrine of executive privilege may frustrate a congressional committee, but it cuts no ice with a grand jury.

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