

Reflections on Watergate

NOBODY is going to believe me, but I actually do not think that the President knew what was going on in the great Watergate caper.

That does sound silly, doesn't it? How was it possible, you may ask, that such a shrewd and hard working man did not know what was being planned right under his nose, long though it may be?

Well, one of the shrewdest and sharpest artist's agents in the whole history of show biz was a man named Joe Glaser. He was the kind of American original who could have made a fortune doing anything he was interested in. In fact, he made several fortunes before he turned to the task that was his natural role: representing artists as a salesman.

Joe Glaser built up one of the largest independent agencies in the entertainment world and the two men who were his assistants split one fine morning and started their own agency.

How So?

How could Joe not have known? It seemed impossible at the time. He was too smart, too shrewd and entirely too suspicious to let a couple of underlings conspire right under his nose to pick off his best acts and form their own agency. But they did and he didn't know a thing about it. In fact, he first heard of it when a Variety reporter called him up to ask him if it was true.

The United States Government and the White House represent a larger field of activity, of course, than did old Joe Glaser's booking office, but I think the situation is the same.

The President is entirely too smart to have engaged in this comic caper for the simple reason that — in my estimation — it actually was unnecessary and was mounted with no apparent real important purpose in mind. It would seem the politician who has demonstrated acuity of the degree shown by the President over the years just wouldn't have gone for this one.

Of course, the rest of the entourage is another matter. What a field day Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl could have had with the various minor characters in this drama, to say noth-

ing of the whole John & Martha bit. It would be hard to invent a better cast.

The whole trouble, of course, is the isolation of the President as has been documented in numerous books about the White House in recent years.

It seems to be true that he has had no one around him but a bunch of ambitious career yes-men, rather like the second echelon of executives in

did they think they were doing with the whole Watergate thing, much less the film-of-the-40s attempt to smooth it out afterward with suitcases full of money? From the beginning it seemed obvious that the President figured the Democrats were no threat this time out, so why risk all this?

And the value of the bugging caper rests on the assumption that high level strategy would be over-

lons of the government have felt ever since the first tip of the Watergate iceberg surfaced that the best thing to say was the old Jimmie Durante response from "Jumbo."

When he was challenged as he walked off the lot leading an elephant, he merely replied "What elephant?"

What elephant, indeed, and not only what elephant, but why even raise the question? Surely the tired, impatient responses of John Mitchell implying as they did the idiocy of the very act of questioning, should have satisfied anyone. And we all know the press is merely part of a giant conspiracy to present the worst side of everything the President does.

However, pride goeth before a fall and I don't say there will be less criticism of the press from the White House in the future, but if there is not, it will surely look even more out of focus than it has.

His Own Decisions

All the way back to his first political campaign, the President has been the person who ran his own race, made his own decisions and plotted his own strategy. He listened to others, but when push came to shove, he made the choices. It requires too great a suspension of disbelief to accept the argument that he has changed.

What has changed, one surmises, is the pressures of the job and in the context of less time and less flexibility, surrounded by ever more ambitious helots, the man who once made all the important decisions has had to let more and more of them be made by others.

If you think you got troubles, just try to imagine what it must be like right now to be John Mitchell. The Watergate affair is only part of it. Any minute Martha may make another phone call!

Come to think of it, the phone call from Martha which has hung in the background all along may very well be responsible for Mitchell's muddled thinking. He couldn't get a clear view of the problem. He was worried too much about whom she would call next. That's as good an explanation as any.



ABOVE IT ALL

some ad agency, clawing their way to the top.

Since the President believes in a paternalistic kind of authority not really subject to debate or likely to encourage dissent of any kind, he gets what he wants. Or rather, I suppose, like the line in The Rolling Stones' song, he gets what he needs. Personally, that is.

The sight of all those White House aides snapping and clawing at one another in a frantic attempt to get off the ship is a little disheartening to anyone. Think of what it must be to the President.

What's the Purpose?

At the least he had expected loyalty, if not brains, and what he has gotten is pure self interest. At that, however, self interest might just be what the whole ethic of his Revised Deal boils down to.

But what in the world

heard and thus become easy to counter. What they probably heard were conversations like those going on now at the various California Democratic camps, as all kinds of power groups and ambitious men try to figure out how to beat Alioto in the Democratic gubernatorial primary. Can Brown do it? Naw, he's too young. What about Roth? Who? Well, we gotta get somebody. And so on.

As any reader of this column knows, I am no enthusiast for the political career of Richard M. Nixon. But if he knew about and tolerated this particular caper, then he was either a great deal dumber than anyone ever figured him to be or else there is a lot more behind the Watergate affair that has not even begun to surface.

The arrogance of power is a frightening thing to behold and it would appear now that the higher eche-