

A Fortunate Crisis

By William V. Shannon

WASHINGTON, April 30—The discovery of the Watergate scandal so early in the second Administration of President Nixon is a fortunate circumstance for the nation. It is likely to slow down and may reverse related and equally ominous developments.

The Watergate affair is a most unusual scandal rivalled only by the stealing of the election of 1876. It does not involve outsiders trying to corrupt members of the Government with valuable gifts or money. Instead, it is a conspiracy by insiders to crush their political opposition and maintain themselves in power.

In the Teapot Dome case, an oil man paid Secretary of the Interior A. B. Fall a bribe of \$100,000 to obtain a valuable oil lease on public land. In the Truman Administration, certain White House aides did favors for shady people and accepted mink coats, deep freezers, suits of clothes, and other comparatively trivial gifts in exchange.

President Eisenhower was deeply embarrassed when Sherman Adams, his chief assistant, intervened with Federal regulatory agencies in behalf of a businessman who had over the years given Adams a vicuna coat and free hotel rooms.

Those earlier scandals were different in kind from Watergate. It threatens not the integrity of the Government's policymaking process, although that is involved, but the freedom of ordinary Americans.

This kind of threat is so unusual in this country's experience, so alien to its traditions, that most Americans have difficulty taking it seriously. The Times last week carried a report from Muncie, Indiana, telling of the reaction in that typical American city. The local paper carried a letter from a reader who pointed out: "No lives were lost, no one harmed, no bank robbed, or large amount of money lost. And so far as we can detect, no one in particular was harmed. It is indeed getting boring."

It is boring only if the defense of freedom is boring. Watergate was a calculated attempt to tip the scales of power which already weigh in favor of an incumbent Administration.

When those in office not only make use of their inherent advantages but also engage in a systematic effort to wiretap and "bug" their political opponents, to sabotage their opponents' meetings, to put spies in their offices, to steal material from their files and to forge incriminating letters, then the whole procedure by which a free people elect their rulers is gravely compromised.

The power at the disposal of any modern government to manipulate opinion and to coerce the ordinary citizen is fearsome. Long before electronic bugs, closed-circuit television, and other modern devices for surveillance and control had been invented, thoughtful men worried about governments becoming too powerful and making themselves into the masters rather than the servants of citizens. That is why the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution states: "The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects against unreasonable searches and seizures shall not be violated."

President Nixon and his closest associates have repeatedly shown themselves to be insensitive to constitutional restraints upon the exercise of executive power. The Constitution clearly intended that the President should share the war power with the Senate but Mr. Nixon conducted the Vietnam war for four years in defiance of the Senate and is now bombing in Cambodia without any visible constitutional sanction.

In dismantling the Office of Economic Opportunity, the Administration is violating a law passed by Congress last year. In impounding funds—not in part or for a limited time—but to kill who programs permanently, the White House seeks to usurp the most fundamental power of Congress, the power to determine public spending.

President Nixon and his associates have also evinced deep hostility tinged with contempt for various public and private institutions. They have gagged public television and tried to undermine the public's confidence in commercial television and in leading newspapers. On great public controversies, they have ignored or disparaged the opinions of religious leaders, college presidents, student groups, and Negro organizations.

Yet independent centers of power which a Government has to take into account are the essential feature of an open, free society, as distinguished from a closed, monolithic one. Whether consciously or otherwise, President Nixon has given the country a kind of slow-motion dress rehearsal of how political authoritarianism would begin to consolidate its power.

The Watergate scandal, a secret and lawless effort to rig the election and then to conceal the guilty higher-ups, is the characteristic, almost inevitable, scandal of this Administration. If its exposure causes the President to back away from his other ominous attempts at lawless manipulation and control, then the Republic—which is far greater and more precious than the Presidency or any other particular office—will have been well served.

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