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Pardon . . . Me

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

The Second A. J. Liebling Counter-Convention began here in a happy bath of booze, amity and self-satisfied anti-Nixon one-liners. "The slogan is four more years with two off for good behavior," one reporter said to another who replied that she'd heard "Truman Capote is writing a new book about Watergate. He's calling it, 'In Cold Cash.'"

Dick Tuck, the Democrats' merry prankster whom the Republicans erroneously but flatteringly blame for introducing dirty tricks into national politics, announced that "Charlie Manson has issued a statement asking that we don't prejudge the President," while someone else predicted that the Nixon Memorial Library would be moved to Fort Leavenworth. In the game of Can You Top This?, another put in that "Mitchell is so important they're only going to let him make license plates with low numbers," to which Tuck rejoined that the new White House is "Pardon . . . me," and everybody laughingly agreed that "Nixon's The One."

Liebling II is sponsored by (MORE), the journalism review based in New York which tries to keep us in the commercial media reasonably honest and accurate. On other days the younger, farther left and less compromising participants would be counter-conventioning against the American Society of Newspaper Editors concurrently meeting uptown at another hotel. But not in this year of Watergate.

The younger ones are so well pleased by the performance of their rich elders that they have invited on to their program editors from the Boston Globe, the Chicago Sun-Times, and above all, The Washington Post.

The first credit for breaking the biggest newspaper story any of us are likely to see goes to Post reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward with their immediate editor, Barry Sussman; the second credit goes to the paper's maximum editor Ben Bradlee and publisher Kay Graham, who stuck by the story through the months when all they were getting was abuse from Ron Ziegler and silence from most of their brother media executives.

But at the (MORE) party all of us Post Toasties were swelling up in the cream of their accomplishment. Even we cornflakes who had nothing to do with it know that inside our cereal box is the Breakfast of Champions. Why the copyboys over at the office are walking around with a little extra swagger. The place looks more like a television studio than an inky newsroom. Just to work for The Washington Post is to get interviewed by an electronic correspondent from Japan or Germany or Iowa.

The office joke is that Bernstein and Woodward have two sets of desks, one where they interview various federally employed crooks; and one where they get interviewed on how they do it. It is a unique and high moment in American journalism and anyone lucky enough to have any connection with it can't help but love it; and snap, crackle, pop with pride.

The brittle hostesses from New York, the out-of-town freelancers, the hopeful young ones looking for a job, the reporters, the wits, the journalistic groupies and substantial editors, all who'd come to drink at Liebling II were trying to guess what's next. The town is alive with one rumor, they're even calling up from the Senate trying to confirm the talk that The Post is getting ready to burst the ultimate and last story, the big mega bombola that would pin everything personally and incontrovertibly to Nixon.

Whether or not that story is ever to be, some future events are more discernible. One is that television news which has played such a small part in Watergate till now is warming up its cameras for the Ervin hearings. This will put the story of White House crime in every living room in America, provided the networks don't back off and harken to the cries that the media must now join in the cover-up it exposed, to save the presidency.

The fear is growing among Washington's monarchists that if all the public ever finds out all the facts, the demand for impeachment and decapitation of the royal head may prove irresistible. History, however, teaches that an occasional beheading not only strengthens the throne but instructs future occupants in manners and humility. Conceded, it didn't work so well with the French Bourbons, but you can argue that if Charles I hadn't gotten a good chopping, Elizabeth II would not now be reigning.

Whatever the outcome, the presidency is in no danger, and least of all from having the citizenry know what the President may have done. In fact, administering the *coup de grace* to the wounded, baleful bull in the White House may further orderly government.

One of the reporters at the party said he'd just come from covering a Baltimore bank robbery trial where the defense lawyer sought to discredit the testimony of an FBI witness by asking the jury, "After what we've learned about the FBI role in Watergate, can you possibly believe this man?"

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