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Ironies and Hypocrisies

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ESSAY

WASHINGTON, May 9—Like almonds and raisins, ironies and hypocrisies go well with each other.

The most obvious hypocrisy in the Watergate case is that men who have preached "law and order" appear to have broken the law. In the Ellsberg case, the irony is that men took the law in their own hands to investigate a man accused of taking the law in his own hands. There are others, of lesser magnitude, worth examining as well:

Hypocrisy: The only bug that bugs us is the bug that bugs our friends. With society rightly aroused to the invasion of privacy by snoopers, burglars and microphones, along comes an F.B.I. "source" blasting the Department of Justice for pulling out a bug placed on the Teamsters' telephones. To many who call themselves civil libertarians, teamster is a code word for union reactionaries; in this case, the hero-villain stereotype is flipped, as the benefit of the doubt is transferred from the buggee to the bugger.

Irony: You can't tell a package by its packager. The reason Watergate was permitted to develop, a lawyer friend told me with great finality, is that the Administration is shot through with shallow advertising men trained to be more concerned with appearance than reality. Now, let's examine the professions of those, innocent or not, whose names have been mentioned: in the press: Haldeman and Chapin are admen. Magruder was in merchandising and you could call that close to an adman.

Mitchell is a lawyer, Colson is a lawyer, Ehrlichman is a lawyer, Dean is a lawyer, Krogh is a lawyer, Kalmbach, Segretti, Strachan—all lawyers. This is not to suggest that unfair occupational slurs should be directed at the bar, nor should guilt be presumed in any case, but if I were a lawyer, I wouldn't knock admen.

Irony: The proof of the pudding is in the cheating. The argument most frequently advanced against the President's New Federalism by liberal critics went this way: "If the power to decide national priorities, presently located in scandal-free Washington, were to be transferred out to states, cities and local communities—then that power would be abused by the well-known venality, greed and irresponsibility of the political hacks who work at the local level."

At some expense to the reputation of several of its officials, the Nixon Administration has finally made the point it had hitherto failed to communicate: No level of government has a monopoly on virtue.

Like the Oboe, "an ill wind which nobody blows good," Watergate makes the case for urgency of administrative decentralization, one of the essential tenets of the New Federalism. Nixon men fail to see that the dramatic, vivid demonstration of Watergate—which was not planned for this purpose—enables them to say "I told you so," that the supposedly super-clean Federal level of government has no special claim to the people's trust. In the enormous, bitter lemon of Watergate, there may yet be lemonade.

Hypocrisy: What is a source for the goose is not a source for the gander. Often, when a defense attorney or prosecutor wants to leak a tidbit from the grand jury room, the following colloquy takes place:

Leaksman: You've got to cover my tracks on this.

Investigative reporter: Don't worry, I'll gladly go to jail before—

Leaksman: No, that wouldn't help me. You have to put in the paper that when you asked me, I refused to compromise the sanctity of the grand jury room and slammed the phone down on you.

The investigative reporter, to protect his source, too often acquiesces, and writes something like this: "The district attorney (or whoever is the leaker), when reached by telephone, declined to comment, citing Rule 21 of the Canon of Ethics, etc." Rarely does any journalist want to include a "refused to comment" in his story, unless it serves his purpose of concealment: Thus, when we see a vigorous rejection of comment in print by some public figure in a "source story," we can assume there is a good chance that both he and the writer are protesting too much.

Such an overt "grant of anonymity," a standard practice of investigative journalism, is being insisted upon by accomplished leakers and is achieving an honored status as a tool in digging out the facts.

Yet, in a story charging a massive governmental cover-up, in righteously flaying zealots for putting the ends before the means, does not conscience twinge in the reporter who covers up his source in print, using just a little black-and-white lie, putting the noble end of informing the public before the ignoble means of misleading the reader?

Unfair comparison, of course. Matter of degree. After all, when the end is so good, and the means just a *tiny bit* deceptive—. Yes, but isn't that the attitude that turns a moralist into a moralizer and leads good men astray?