

# Afraid of the Truth

"The profoundest of all infidelities is the fear that the truth will be bad." — Herbert Spencer.

With the Watergate investigations moving toward the crunch, this is a good time to recall those words of the English philosopher because there is a widespread impulse to, quick, close the lid on the box for fear of what we'll find.

Columnist Nicholas Von Hoffman first said it in jest, that maybe we should forget the whole thing before we found out too much. Too much, of course, meaning that President Nixon himself was culpable.

Melvin Laird, Nixon's first Secretary of Defense, then said it seriously. If by some wild chance it turned out that the President was involved, he declared, it would be better if the public never found out about it.

Others have expressed variations of the same theme.

Even Bill Buckley, usually the hardliner of relentless logic, suggested that if worst came to worst we should fob off the affair with a congressional resolution censuring the President but not sacking him.

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**THE COMMON THOUGHT** in all this is that even if the trail does lead to the President, some way must be found not to pursue the issue to the prescribed conclusion, impeachment, because that would be too disruptive to the country.

To my way of thinking, such reasoning is as dangerous as the arrogant amorality of the Watergate conspirators themselves.

The framers of the Constitution had recent memories of what life was like under capricious kings and their captains — and with no legal way for the people to be rid of them.

That is why they wrote into the Constitution a provision for impeaching unworthy officials, and specifically the man at the top.

This is not just a right which they bequeathed us. It is also an obligation.

The historian Arnold Toynbee said an early symptom that a civilization has gone into decline is its neglect of routine maintenance. I interpret that to include moral and ethical maintenance.

If we stop short of ripping out all of the Watergate dry rot for fear the roof may cave in, we set a precedent that contains the seed of our downfall.

For if the guilty get away with this, the message to the future administrations is clear: The sky (or the sewer) is the limit.

We should be careful not to assign presumptive guilt, but we shouldn't perform an ostrich act either. The painful fact is that the Watergate affair has become the Nixon affair.

The revelations have spread far beyond a single hotel break-in in both time and geography.

We learn that the files of Jack Kennedy's doctor were ransacked in the Nixon-Kennedy campaign of 1960.

We learn that a Nixon team faked Democratic campaign literature when Nixon ran for governor in 1962, just as a Nixon team faked the Muskie letter in last year's presidential campaign.

We are told Nixon's lawyer controlled a secret campaign fund and Nixon's FBI director burned documents.

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**SINCE NIXON** seems to be the common denominator and prime beneficiary of all this activity, stretching across a continent and a decade, it becomes increasingly difficult to believe he was unaware of it.

But deductive reasoning isn't legal proof, and for the sake of the country I hope the Watergate investigations establish clearly that the President wasn't involved.

But if it turns out otherwise, then he must be impeached, also for the sake of the country.

In a republic there is no indispensable man. And no truth too terrible to face.