



BY SHANA ALEXANDER

## THE CRAZY GANG

While we are waiting for the indictments to come down, everybody has his own theory about Watergate, and I have one too, gentler than some. I think they were all crazy. Let me explain.

From the instant the burglars were caught red-handed and rubber-gloved in the offices of the Democratic National Committee, there has been only one good period for the Watergate bad guys. That was the few weeks between the end of the trial and the fatal moment when McCord's letter to Judge Sirica opened the whole mess up again. The hush money was in the pipeline between White House and jail house, and everybody who could make trouble had been either paid off or buttoned up. The top Nixonmen were free to turn their full attention to the proper affairs of state.

So, down with permissiveness, pornography, drugs and welfare! Up with law and order! On with hard work! And what was the White House working on so hard during this brief era of domestic tranquillity? A new, get-tough crime program, that's what: a package designed to attack crime "without pity," to bring back the death penalty, to override "soft-headed judges," and, oddly, to abolish insanity as a defense against prosecution. Ironically, the bad guys thereby knocked out the one defense that could surely save their hides.

### RIGHT AND WRONG

The insanity defense states that a person cannot be found guilty of a crime unless he knows the difference between right and wrong, unless he is capable of understanding the consequences of his acts. What has appalled many of us from the beginning about Watergate, even more than the criminal aspects, are the moral aspects. Crooks in government are nothing new, though we may never before have had so many of them. What is new is the impression of widespread moral bankruptcy at the highest levels. It is enough to give nightmares to anyone who believes in constitutional government.

As nightmare, Watergate is easy to explain—they were all mad. Drunk with power, cockeyed with arrogance, unseasoned by political experience, untempered by much human feeling and unencumbered by any political ideals beyond the ideal of remaining in office, the top Nixonmen were susceptible to the contagious, pernicious lunacy of power.

Such a madness could not afflict men with experience in public life, men who comprehend at least the political consequences of their acts, men alert to the public and sensitive to other politicians, men who know that the politician is always part leader, part follower.

But gradually the seasoned professionals—Rogers, Finch, Klein, Laird, Harlow—had been pushed aside. The new men knew only the power game and the image biz. What does one make of a man who writes, as Ehrlichman did in his letter of resignation, "I have always felt that the appearance of honesty and integrity is every bit as important . . . as the fact of one's honesty and integrity"?

### NO MORAL WEIGHT

The new Nixonmen didn't even know the difference between disagreement and disloyalty. Although they had the substantial jobs of the Administration, they themselves were insubstantial, because they had no moral weight. The machine they managed was powerful, hurtling over millions of heads, but inside it men like Mitchell, Colson, Dean, Stans, Haldeman and Ehrlichman were floating, suspended, weightless.

They knew the law; if they were breaking it, they certainly knew it. Yet in some nightmarish way they seem not to have fully understood the difference between right and wrong. They did not really appreciate that the inevitable consequences of their acts would be to scuttle the ship of state.

The other morning on TV, Gov. Ronald Reagan, the West Coast solon, explained that the perpetrators of Watergate were "stupid and foolish, but not criminal."

"Illegal," he then suggested, would be a better word than "criminal." At that point something in me snapped (we are all a bit loony these days) and I heard myself shouting back at the TV screen. "Stupid . . . foolish . . . illegal . . . criminal . . . What in God's name did all those people think they were doing!"

"Those Cubans in rubber gloves maybe they thought they were fighting Communism. But what about all the sleek lawyers, men who know the law like the trout knows his pool? What did they think *they* were up to?"

I began to draw up a list.

■ The Cubans thought they were fighting Communism.

■ Liddy and Hunt thought that they were attending to plumbing, and fixing leaks.

■ Dean thought he was holding the truth at bay, but found out he was holding the bag.

■ Ex-Navy captain Gray thought he had no need to know. So he served his flag by burning the bag.

■ Ehrlichman thought to nail Ellsberg on moral grounds, but the man with the moral hangups was Ehrlichman.

■ Haldeman thought he could package the Presidency.

■ Mitchell thought he had "deniability."

■ Ziegler thought he could declare the record "inoperative."

■ Kalmbach thought that he could sell indulgences.

■ Vesco thought he could buy his way out by buying his way in.

■ Stans, with his nose for gold, thought he could sell hope on a *caveat emptor* basis.

■ Kleindienst thought he could speak the unspeakable word: impeachment. It was in fact his insufferably crude and arrogant flaunting of this word before the Senate committee which triggered the latest wave of disclosures.

■ And Mr. Nixon? Despite the appalling banality and self-pity of his Monday-night speech, we still don't know what he really thought. But as James Reston points out, it is wise with Mr. Nixon not to pay attention to what he says but to what he does.

### THE UNSPEAKABLE WORD

As for the unspeakable word, I, like almost every other American, dislike uttering it. I, like all but the vulture-hearted, want to believe that Mr. Nixon walked the water, unwet, in the sea of corruption of his Administration. I too want to believe him ignorant, more ignorant than myself.

This week, for the first time since the scandal broke, I have come to believe that this ignorance will pass. I have begun to feel confident that with the continuing help of the vigorous free press, an honest judiciary and the attentive concern of an aroused public, the ship of state will right itself. The convoy of separate investigations now forming up like escort vessels around a damaged craft will enable her to ride out the storm.

The good news this week is that, after so many months in the doldrums, the ship has begun deserting the rats.