

THE NATION

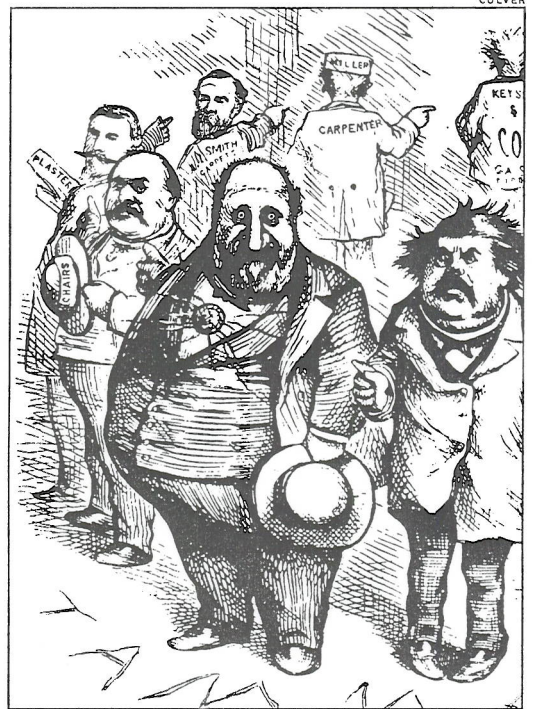
scandal, none was elected to political office. Almost all were appointed by Nixon. A glance at the list of alleged conspirators recalls Sam Rayburn's grumble when he considered John F. Kennedy's best and brightest: "I'd feel a lot better about them if one of them had run for sheriff once."

Says Senator Philip Hart, the Michigan Democrat: "The level of decency among politicians is at least as high as it is among lawyers. Most of the bandits and bad actors in Watergate are not politicians. Whatever they are, they're not politicians." Representative John Anderson, an Illinois Republican, provides the bottom line: "Watergate was an aberration . . . it should not be viewed as some new evidence that all the timbers are rotten."

Corruption certainly exists, but it is important to make distinctions—between larger and lesser transgressions, between various motives and aims. The big city machines, forever symbolized by Boss Tweed, were rotten, but some also performed necessary social functions. The Teapot Dome affair of Harding's Administration, the freezer and

coat giveaways of the Truman and Eisenhower eras, were corrupt acts based on organized greed, some massive, some relatively modest. Watergate is a far greater malignancy. These conspirators wanted to short-circuit the electoral and judicial processes, to rewrite the book on national security, to manipulate the standards of ethics and morality.

Past Presidents, including Kennedy and Johnson, have of course stretched their powers to the limit. But nowhere in U.S. history does there seem to be the systematic breaking of laws by White House officials and the involvement of Government agencies that characterize the Watergate affair. As the *Charlotte Observer* put it, if the American majority believes that Watergate is "just a somewhat exaggerated version of politics as usual," then "the American political system is deathly ill." Perhaps the most important thing to rescue from the Watergate mess is the public's ability to make distinctions, both moral and legal. Fortunately, despite the pervasiveness of the everybody-is-doing-it line, the U.S. still appears to be shockable.



THOMAS NAST CARTOON OF BOSS TWEED

THE PRESIDENCY/HUGH SIDNEY

Some Lessons to Be Learned

THERE has been a liberation of sorts in Washington.

The White House cops smile and sometimes even give a "Good morning." Calls to obscure aides, which used to disappear into nothingness, are sometimes returned. You can get a White House staff member to admit that President Nixon may have made a mistake.

The federal bureaucracy and even the Congress feel, at least for the time being, a certain release from political fear. The instrument of oppression has been dismantled. Its size and pervasiveness were sensed but could never be accurately documented until the Watergate dam broke. Now the city is being flooded with stories of an arrogant and ignorant White House cadre that amassed and abused power.

The larger question remains: Was it done on the direct orders of Richard Nixon? But no matter who may have ordered what, the lessons to be learned are many.

One of the lessons should be on the folly of filling the Cabinet with pliable and obedient men of limited experience and stature. One letter to a Cabinet member from John Ehrlichman began something like this: "The President has asked me to tell you how displeased he is with what you have done about . . ." The Cabinet member was petrified that this letter would get out. "Can you imagine what would have happened under Ike or Johnson if such a letter had been received?" mused a White House man. "Their Cabinet members would have taken the White House apart."

Another lesson to be learned is that the White House cannot be considered the repository of everything that is wise and right. The legend of omniscience should not be allowed to grow again. The list of adult men who received memos, phone calls or visits from presidential aides and responded with unquestioning haste is staggering. One former Nixon aide, still so young that he is back in college, remembers his own astonishment at what action a call from him could bring in a department. It became a game to many of these people who had never savored such authority.

Their special joy was intoning "the President wants . . ." That was enough to persuade many doubters. Another line that gained currency was "I have a mandate from the Pres-

ident . . ." What that meant nobody really knew, but it sounded authoritative. In case of defiance, the talk sometimes got rougher. One Nixon aide heard Ehrlichman bark: "If he won't do it, fire him." Another venomous official told doubtful minions: "Remember, you are all serving at my pleasure."

The monster grew, and we finally had the tawdry spectacle of the State Department throwing open its secret files to a shadowy unknown from the White House, of the CIA plunging into an illegal assault on this country's own citizens, of young officials being ordered to tell lies, of the operating head of the FBI burning evidence. "Can you imagine what J. Edgar Hoover would have done with those files if Ehrlichman and Dean had even hinted that he burn them?", chortled a White House survivor.

Buried in the Watergate tragedy are a few small tales of heroism. There is the Administration figure who got a directive from the White House that went against his agency's policy. He balked. "I'm ordering you," declared the White House aide. "By whose authority?" "The President's," came the answer. "That's funny," answered the bureaucrat, "I thought I was acting under the same authority."

Once the White House wanted immediate release of some new guidelines for business depreciation. "To hell with them!" roared then Deputy Secretary of the Treasury Charles E. Walker. He had an agreement with Congress that no action would be taken without prior consultation. He was on the phone until 2 a.m. and had to drag in most of the Administration's top economic advisers before he won his point of honor. But he did win.

While we are rummaging in the wreckage for heroes, it may be time to step back and give a cheer for the amorphous and maligned bureaucracy—the same old bureaucracy that has been alternately humiliated, squelched, ignored and attacked by all modern Presidents.

The CIA operatives in the ranks sounded the alarm about E. Howard Hunt Jr. when their superiors didn't. The FBI agents on the line forced out L. Patrick Gray III when he admitted he burned the files. Justice Department investigators whispered their dismay over the cover-up at higher levels. If Watergate yields dividends, it could be that next time a civil servant hears the line "I have a mandate from the President . . ." he will alert every one of his better instincts and ask every question he can think of before he acts.