

Ralph J. Gleason

'Greatest Show on Earth'

IT'S A GOOD thing that the Great Programmer in the Sky arranged things so that the professional basketball playoffs ended before the Watergate hearings began. Otherwise, I don't know what would have happened.

And I began worrying after the first week about how they can stretch it out to last until the World Series.

There's no escaping the fact that the entire Watergate scandal, with its ancillary show in Los Angeles, the Ellsberg Pentagon Papers trial, has been the single most important news event, show business event and just plain educational experience within memory.

Normally blase citizens, inured to political scandals, uninterested in Mafia tie-ins, fee splitting, barratry, incipient vice or just plain thievery, have been rushing home to catch the news from Washington on three network stations and then watch it all rehashed on Newsroom.

It has been positively exhilarating, a magnificent time to be alive and thankful for a good seat at the greatest show on earth.

Those Old Sayings

Actually, the Watergate-Pentagon Papers stories, running in tandem, have been an extraordinary force attracting people to take a cold look at what goes on in high places. No civics course has ever given such insight into how things work, and millions of people who had abandoned hope that anything ever could be done about it are beginning to see the truth of many old sayings: "For want of a nail the shoe was lost" and so on.

Watching the news and then the Senate Committee (up betimes and on with the TV; if lucky, shower during the commercials) the old adages from childhood ring through the mind: "Oh what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive" is only one of them.

But the scenario itself is good drama. Not only the day by day exposures, but the way in which it all came about. "How the mighty have fallen." "Pride goeth before a fall." There's a couple more.

The relentless exploration by dedicated reporters is pulling the covers off the most fetid mass of corruption yet seen in this country, and the fascination with the story, as shown by the TV audiences and by the fact that newspapers can sell out editions once again, is an indication that the people care.

What they are seeing, it ought to be said loud and clear, is not the end of the American party system or any other kind of depressing conclusions. They see right before them the clearest proof of the strength of the American Constitutional government

there will yet be more again. It may come to a situation never before experienced under our Constitution, but the government will not collapse, the country will not grind to a halt, because the structure has more to it than merely an executive level.

Neither resignation nor impeachment will mark the end of the Republic, only the end of a man, a system and a style. "Nothing is lost save honor," as Jim Fiske remarked almost a century ago in a situation not without similarities.

The restraint of TV and the press has been quite laudable. There is a flood

be mesmerized as it all spills out before us on the screen.

You never know when one network or another will come up with another of those inspirational interviews with Martha Mitchell. She sings "My Man" almost as well as Fanny Brice. You really can't afford to miss a thing.

It was of more than casual interest to note the flat effect of the underground nuclear explosions on TV. What would ordinarily have been a big story by almost any kind of measurement, was deflated by the hot news quality of Watergate.

Money makes the mare go and the love of it is the root of all evil. Was ever a political scandal so smothered in cash? Suit cases full of cash.

All That Cash

There was so much cash flying around that that young man who hired the buses and paid for the box lunches when the Republicans demonstrated their support of the President, couldn't remember whether he had three or four thousand dollars in cash, much less whom he gave it to. And poor Mrs. Hunt, dead in an air plane crash with a suitcase full of currency.

And now we have a new term to add to current language, "laundered." Cash money passed throughout the country banks in such a way as to conceal its origin. And cash can't even cop the Fifth, can it? As Bob Dylan says, "Money doesn't talk, it swears."

It is a great and educational time to be alive. Nothing is so instructive as close examination of how the lines of power go and what happens when the heat really builds up. There's another old saying echoing in my mind: "If you wish to know what a man is, place him in authority."

And there is yet another, a quote from James Bryce in the "American Commonwealth," that vibrates with relevancy: "Trembling over Presidents and State Governors, over Congress and State Legislatures, over the vast machinery of party, public opinion stands out, in the United States, as the great source of power, the master of servants who tremble before it."

Right on!



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that they could wish for.

Far from being impotent, far from being obsolete, that system is now in the process, slowly at first but with increasing momentum, of righting the whole structure.

Right from a position where the media was intimidated on the one hand and restrained on the other and where the criminal code was being revised as though the Constitutional Amendments did not exist, where the Senate and the House were being arrogantly ignored or emasculated, we are now seeing the balance of power being reestablished.

Since this was written, there undoubtedly have been more exposures and

of comic albums satirizing the whole investigation coming out. They will have a quick sale and a short life.

You can't satirize a situation so rife with its own built-in ironies. Even the razor wit of Lenny Bruce would have been helpless before this exhibition.

Yet it is a great show in the classic sense. Like the televising of the McCarthy hearings and before that the Kefauver Committee (remember Costello saying "I paid-a my tax"?), public drama of such high order is impossible to top. Man is a political animal and the pursuit of power in one form or another is the Great American dynamic. How can we fail to