

Down the Garden Path

Never mind the flowers, men. Keep an eye on them weeds. Convict Timothy Leary has been assigned to tending the petunia beds at Folsom Prison.

From a German government bulletin: "Research now reveals that more than 2500 writers fled the Third Reich and the countries occupied by the German Wehrmacht, though the term 'writer' covers anybody from a Nobel Prize-winner to a local reporter."

Pass the humble pills, Herman.

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HAL LIPSET, the San Francisco private detective and electronics enthusiast, has been asked to sign on for the Watergate prosecution team. He's reluctant, though. Lipset sees it as a two-year job at least, and he's not altogether willing to put in that much time on a single, exclusive assignment.

Lipset got Watergate pretty much out of his system working with the Senate investigating committee. He has met the cast of characters. His lively curiosity has been satisfied.

Lipset assesses James W. McCord Jr., whom he interviewed among others, as a "real pro" in the spy trade. "After all he's been doing this kind of thing for 30 years, and only got caught once, and that once was mostly by accident."

Watergate has been booming Lipset's business in that it has heightened the paranoia associated with fear of bugged rooms and telephones. More and more clients are calling him in to sweep their premises for wiretaps and crazy little microphone-transmitters.

"People are worried about wiretaps more than ever" says Lipset. "And a lot of them have reason to be."

The state of the bugging art remains about the same. No startling new devices, but the old ones are creepy enough. They are mostly the product of moonlighting technicians who put them together in their home workshops and sell them for a price. A good wiretap gadget is about the size of an ordinary bar-dice game die. The unexpert can look into the innards of his phone directly at a wiretap bug and not know what he's seeing. In all that plastic and spaghetti it nestles quite unobtrusively.

If you hear clicks and clacks and weird beeps and buzzings, don't conclude that

your line is tapped. The bug does its work silently.

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AN ASPECT of Watergate that interests me has as much to do with Joe Alioto's office and the street cleaning bureau and the innocent old art commission as it does with the White House. It's the by now overpowering urge of government people high and low to treasure up "secrets."

The aim of the game is to maintain a hand-fed press and public, to decide what's good for them to know and to administer it to them in statements and hand-outs.

On the high diplomatic level we now are our enemies, and the old American ideal of "open covenants, openly arrived at" has been replaced by highly secret bartering sessions in the best tradition of Joseph Stalin and his stone-faced stooges.

I never have quite understood why our people may not say, "Today we have said thus and so to the Slobbovian ambassador, and offered this in return for that." Instead, American diplomats tell foreign diplomats what they dare not, or care not, tell their own constituents. Secrets are stockpiled. The "leak" becomes a dreaded thing, lest the American people get a hint of what's going on in that embassy or the hidden villa.

At the courthouse level everywhere, including here, officials play a game of insidersmanship. It is somehow a splendid thing to know in secret that a hunk of sewer is going to be replaced, or that the airport may get a change of personnel, or what Congressman Blonk told Mayor Mouth in a confidential memo about House Bill 6498.

Nixon, in the now famous phrase, had his plumbers looking for leaks. It has become an absorbing American pastime.

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QUOTE: "There is nothing so common as to imitate the practice of enemies and to use their weapons." —Voltaire.

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WATERGATE'S ALSO supposed to bring election reform. That's what the Senate ostensibly is studying in all this. And locally the Quentin Kopp - John Barbagelata measure to curb campaign spending and campaign contributions is meeting all kinds of resistance. Watch this for a hearing next Tuesday at City Hall. The arguments will be revealing.