

By Victor Gold

"The history of the Victorian Age will never be written: we know too much about it."

—Lytton Strachey, eminent Victorian

WASHINGTON—So might the Big Truth of Watergate never be fully comprehended. Not that the American people know too much about it, in the Lairdian sense. It is simply that since mid-April, in the span of a very few weeks, we have been called on to digest so much, so quickly. And there is apparently so much more to know.

A month ago there was talk in Washington corridors of how little we knew. The investigation of the White House scandal of 1972, it was suggested, had merely touched the tip of an iceberg. Now, presumably, we have reached the waterline only to find ourselves at grips not with an iceberg but a subaquatic glacier so enormous as to mock the promise made by that eminent Victorian Sam Ervin, that his Senate investigating committee intends to "uncover all the relevant facts surrounding these matters."

A question now looms, beyond even that of where it will all end: at the point at which "it" finally comes to a stopping place and the last tunnel is reached by the various Congressional committees, grand juries and the press, will the American people, on whose behalf the exploration was launched, still be following along the glacial trail?

Considering that the revelation of any single segment of the scandal alone, Watergate or Ellsberg or Vesco, would have led to a White House crisis of unprecedented proportions, there is small wonder that disturbing evidence of mass psychological drop-out is beginning to appear.

Thus, while recent surveys indicate that Watergate has finally emerged as a major national issue, there are large numbers of people, not only in the nation's capital but throughout Middle America, growing weary of the day-to-day, hour-by-hour increment of new revelations and added complications. They wonder not where but only when it will end.

Item: Public service-minded television station managers had envisioned for the Ervin hearings the affirmative audience response brought on by the Kefauver investigation two decades ago. However, stations throughout the country have reported thousands of calls protesting the cancellation of regular programing. In Washington, one network affiliate received no fewer than 400 calls on the first day, the most frequent complaint being that viewers were "tired of hearing about Watergate."

Item: The Washington Star-News reports an overwhelming antimedia reader response to its coverage of the

scandal. While some letters-to-the-editor writers have addressed their arguments to the substance of the case, defending the President, a recurring theme has been criticism of the coverage simply as coverage; that is, the inordinate amount of news space given to the story.

Yet, even setting aside the chaff of hearsay and rumor, Watergate-Ellsberg-Vesco has become a reportorial monster impossible to contain or explain by traditional journalistic priorities of space and time. It is too massive, yet too intricate, composed of too many people and parts engaged in separate yet interconnected ventures. And though it relates to men of power in a society fascinated by that subject, it lacks dramatic cohesion, being a story without heroes or even the element of human venality that has made every previous scandal in history if not excusable, at least comprehensible. In brief, to lean on the vernacular of psychedelia, the story is too much, the creation of cynical men proceeding from a premise—Lord Acton's maxim inverted—that if corruption of the political process can empower, then perhaps absolute, or at least pervasive corruption, might empower absolutely.

Indeed, it has been half a century to the year since one of the supreme po-

form to the efficacy of the Big Lie as a means of undermining democratic institutions. That technique, while attempted many times, has never worked in this country. We have always, in the end, rejected the Big Lie; but can we live with the Big Truth?

If our free institutions, more important that the men who may for the moment serve them, are to maintain their credibility, there can be no shortcuts in the quest for full disclosure of all that has happened before and after Watergate. Tedious as the trail downward may be, the American people must follow to the last tunnel, be it five or fifty fathoms deep, and whether or not, even in the Lairdian sense, pursuing and ultimately reaching that Big Truth, hurts.

Victor Gold was press secretary to Vice President Agnew.