

# Watergate and Democracy

For all of the stunning revelations of indecency on high, something very important is missing from my daily diet of news and information.

As I hear that the President was willing to place spies in the mailbox and burglars in the bedroom, or that in the name of "national security" every citizen was a suspect, I keep looking for an explanation of the meaning of all of this to the contours of what we have been pleased for nearly 200 years to call a democracy.

It almost seems as if we are all too stunned to consider it, but that, for me, is at least as timely as the next breathless revelation of hush money from the Philippines and perjury in the name of "the team."

It is remarkable simply to note that we have arrived at the anniversary of Watergate. It was just one year ago that five men in rubber gloves were found in the offices of the Democratic National Committee.

From that night to the present, the press has treated the affair largely as a police investigative story, which is properly how it began. Now, I wish to argue, it has become something very different. Now, it seems to me, the press and the nation are overdue for a deep and continuing inquiry into the implications of these revelations for the present and future and democracy as we have always perceived it.

Regardless of the extent of wrongdoing that is eventually proved, the press is under an obligation to go to the next and more difficult level of examining the question of what ought to be the proper relationship between government and the governed.

It was argued during the height of the war in Indochina that frequently the press was covering the wrong story. We were covering ground action and air support and many of our consumers were fairly thirsting for some persistent inquiry into the questions of what that war and the exercise of awesome power were doing to the foundations of American society. Eventually, we in the press came to see that the war abroad was raising large and ugly welts on the body politic at home. It is fair to say that we have not come to terms with all of them even now.

Watergate reporting can benefit from the press experience with the Indochina tragedy. All of our attention seems riveted on those hearings and the ancillary revelations, many of which have caused some commentators to wonder aloud at "how close we came" to a police state in the name of "national security."

Having uncovered the police aspects of the scandal, the press is now obliged, I believe, to open up for debate a number of questions about how we have been doing business "in the system." It is clear to me that dangerous misconceptions persist in the minds of many Americans.

I am not just speaking of the woman from Sisseton, S.D., who was quoted in this space last week, chiding the press for its "personal vendetta" against "the presidential choice of 49 states." I am also thinking of Patrick Buchanan of the President's staff. He wrote in *The New York Times* earlier this week chastising those who called for Mr. Nixon to enlarge his current stewardship of the White House into some sort of government of "national unity." Mr. Buchanan found such suggestions distasteful in the extreme:

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"What they are urging," he suggested, "is that the President betray the mandate of 1972, that he unilaterally repeal, on their behalf, the democratic verdict of the ballot box . . ."

There, it seems to me, is where the press might begin its deeper inquiry. Irrespective of any possible guilt on the part of President Nixon, Watergate dramatizes in another form the same imbalance in this society as the Indochina tragedy: how powerful should the Chief Executive of this country be? The press has gravitated to the coverage of the presidency in a manner that has in times past approached awe. Much of the rest of the society concurs in this way of looking upon the President as larger than life.

We need a very clear understanding of what has become of the office when men have said that they lied, even committed crimes because someone in a credible position to do so could utter the seven simple words, "it is the wish of the President" that something or another be done.

Arguments abound as to how the presidency came to be an office of such power that its holder could feel justified in setting loose a secret police force on the citizenry or bomb Cambodia without a shred of authority having been granted by the other elected representatives of the people. But the press could help us understand some of the extent of that power so that we can debate in a wider arena than ever if that is what we in a democracy intend for the presidency to be.

The nation was shocked when an attorney general, Mr. Kleindienst, declared before Congress that executive privilege could be meant to extend down to the last file clerk. Given Indochina and Watergate, it is time to take our obligation very seriously and begin explaining again to the American people what the founders intended by creating three branches of government.

Another problem flows from the power of the presidency. The President defined the problem which led to his decision to illegally invade the privacy of citizens as one of "national security." It seems to me that it is time to

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take the question of "security," both internal and external, from the top.

The special investigation unit the White House created was concerned at least in part with Weatherman and the Black Panthers. It would be helpful to know how much of a threat to the security of this nation is posed by such groups or any other group using extra-legal means to protest social conditions. The issue it seems to me that Americans need to understand among themselves is how we are to work out our relationships with each other.

The men in the White House chose the route of the wiretap and the mail cover. It remains a serious question in my mind, a question that puzzles me with each new revelation about this domestic spy operation, as to whether fear and suspicion ought to be the mode by which Americans come to understand their mutual problems and quell their various fears.

The same question applies to our external security. It would be helpful if we could gain some insight as to the level of the threat posed to Americans from other countries in this era of detente with the other nuclear powers.

The reason I miss all of these explanations in connection with my Watergate reading is that the issue of security looms large through all of this. The question must be posed and the issue balanced out: which was the graver threat to our security, the dangers being posed from within and without or the solutions devised within the White House to meet those dangers? If I could add that to my diet, I'd digest the remainder of the Watergate disclosures more intelligently.