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Jean-Pierre Laffont/Sygma

The Turning of America

By Charles A. Reich

SAN FRANCISCO—The great story of Watergate is not the disclosures themselves but the reaction to them. Lawless abuse of power has been a major and horrifying fact of life in America, and especially official Washington, at least since the end of World War II. Watergate has thus far exceeded earlier abuses only in the egregiousness of its blunders and the fact that it was directed against the Democratic party rather than an unpopular minority. The initial response of a large segment of the public—indifference because “everybody does it”—seems wholly understandable. What is new, and profoundly important, is that the establishment is for the first time beginning to reject what it long ignored and passively sanctioned.

To view Watergate as a self-contained series of actions by overzealous men in the Nixon Administration, correctable by exposure, prosecution and possible impeachment, is to close one's eyes to our political and legal history since World War II. During that entire period we have been moving steadily away from constitutional government and toward arbitrary rule. Two decades of the dissenting opinions of the late Justice Hugo L. Black tell the story eloquently and passionately. It is the story of a society which has resorted over and over again to repression rather than to the open discussion and responsible solution of problems. Each time a problem such as economic injustice, corporate concentration or decay of urban life is brushed aside with a public relations solution the society has to call for more repression. And repression generates a dynamic of its own, a government spying upon its own people. Radicals have seen this all along; it is only the establishment that is surprised.

The narrow view of the reality taken by nearly all observers and participants makes them unable to see the Watergate process for what it really is. It is not a step-by-step revelation of heretofore undetected misdeeds. It is a step-by-step chain of attitudes on the part of the establishment as it is shocked into awareness by conditions that literally forced themselves on

unwilling viewers. Event by event, our leaders, and more gradually, the public, are slowly being educated, slowly being compelled to question and finally to condemn methods of government they previously suffered to exist. In this process they are unconscious molecules in social evolution, unaware of the part they are playing. The political use of law enforcement, the bypassing of the Constitution, the corruption of Government have long been tragically visible to anyone who would look. Watergate is really a process of new eyes being opened.

Why this sudden growth of awareness on the part of the resolutely unaware? Our system has trusted itself to blind economic forces, to the blind logic of unguided technology and organization, to the appalling idea that social good can come out of each individual or group struggling for selfish success in a “game” which treats the other “players” as the enemy, with law made a part of this game. We have trusted that the contradiction of advanced capitalism could be left unresolved, the alienation of our people could be managed by manipulation, basic human needs ignored in favor of artificially promoted desires. Such a system is fundamentally irrational. It is extraordinary how long it has continued, but ultimately it must become intolerable. The striking fact about Watergate is that it is happening despite the indifference that greeted it, despite the wish that it would go away. No reformers or activists or rebels brought it about. Watergate came from within. The system itself has begun to self-destruct.

The path of change will be apparent as soon as we recognize one simple fact: Watergate is the product not of an orderly society but of anarchy. Those neat young men with their charts and team mentality give the appearance of order, but the reality is anarchy. Anarchy, no matter how disguised, is the fear, paranoia and lawlessness that result from the failure to plan for fundamental needs, the failure to control mindless forces, the failure to seek the good of the community as a whole. And so change will be in the direction of beginning a rational and orderly search for balance, proportion, and limit, for a broader and more humane set of values and goals, and for a new concept

of community. The path of change is obscure and disconnected; it has starts and stops such as the antiwar movement and the McGovern campaign, but historians will see the path clearly, and Watergate will serve as an important marker.

In a technological world, which can manufacture reality at will, man cannot passively accept the so-called reality that is forced upon him. The cold war, the threat of internal subversion, the need for wiretapping, the demand for “security,” the concept of winners and losers, the economy of false growth and true impoverishment, are all monstrous untruths, fictions that have been imposed upon us. Passively, cynically, despairingly we have accepted these lines, and the consequence of that acceptance is the Government of narrow, self-seeking, corrupt men which we elected. The lesson of Watergate must be that we are responsible for what we call reality. It is not something that is inevitable, but something we chose. And having the power to choose, we have the power to choose and to create something better. The base and shameful pleas of the men now testifying before the Watergate committee is that they did not decide, they only followed. The moment we acknowledge responsibility for our present condition, we regain the sacred power that human consciousness gives us, the power to choose by what truths we shall live.

Charles A. Reich is professor of law at Yale and author of “The Greening of America.”