

The Personal Tragedies

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, June 14—The other day, seeking to explain the human tragedies in the Watergate case, Senator Sam Ervin recalled Cardinal Wolsey's piercing cry of regret in Shakespeare's "Henry VIII": "Had I but served by God with half the zeal I served my King, he would not in mine age have left me naked to mine enemies."

The drama unfolds here with Old Testament vengeance, but we have not yet seen, and probably will never see, the full extent of personal sorrow involved in this incredible tale. One can only imagine the effect of all this on the families of the accused, the regrets of men who were more faithful to the President than to the nation.

There is a sameness about these young men now appearing before the television cameras in the hearings. They are not at all like John Mitchell and Maurice Stans, the tough and wily old veterans of the big business wars.

On the whole, they are handsome, intelligent, industrious and articulate, conservatively dressed and barbered, obviously ambitious, and proud of their past successes and their beautiful and modestly dressed wives.

They are not at all like John Ehrlichman, with his thin mouth, drooping at the corners, and his chin-high arrogance, or like Bob Haldeman, with

WASHINGTON

his crew cut and his parade-ground manner. They have been believable witnesses most of the time, responsive, courteous, and in some cases, notably Hugh Sloan Jr., appealingly frank.

More than most of the Senators on the Ervin Committee, Howard Baker of Tennessee has tried to get at the philosophy of these men. He has a way of pausing and wondering how such men could have got into such a moral tangle. How could such appalling decisions have been taken in such casual ways? What on earth were you thinking about? Why, when there was so much to lose and so little to gain, did you not express your doubts?

Jeb Stuart Magruder, for one, could not answer even to his own satisfaction. He had seen men like his old ethics teacher, William Sloan Coffin, an antiwar activist and chaplain at Yale University, urging students to burn their draft cards and shut down the city of Washington; and men like Coffin, whom he respected, created "a feeling of resentment and frustration about being able to deal with issues on a legal basis."

"We had become somewhat inured to breaking the law," Mr. Magruder said, but this, he agreed, did not excuse the Watergate or the cover-up. "I fully accept responsibility for what was a disastrous decision."

Watching Magruder's face, suddenly animated as he tried and finally failed to explain acts he knew at the time to be both unethical and illegal, one suddenly realized that it was exactly a year ago this week that the Watergate break-in took place, and that Magruder and probably others whom he implicated had been living night and day with these deceptions.

What did they speak about at home during these long twelve months, when the newspapers were splashing the charges all over the front pages? Did they keep the truth from their wives as well as from the President? It is hard to believe they did and even harder to imagine what their women said.

"We should behave toward our country," J. B. Priestley once wrote, "as women behave toward the men they love. A loving wife will do anything for her husband except to stop criticizing and trying to improve him. That is the right attitude for a citizen. We should cast the same affectionate but sharp glance at our country. We should love it, but also insist on telling it all its faults."

At least Martha Mitchell tried after her own fashion, and got her man out of Washington if not out of the mess. But the other family stories we do not know, and outside the families, on the basis of the evidence so far, these men seemed to have a very odd sense of friendship and duty.

For when one Senator asked Mr. Magruder whether it did not occur to him that burglarizing and sabotaging the political opposition was a very important decision that should be placed before the President, he did not seem to feel he could go beyond Mr. Haldeman.

Only young Hugh Sloan, the former treasurer of the Finance Committee to Re-Elect the President, seems to have acted on his conscience and insisted on expressing his doubt. And he was invited to take a vacation!

Future testimony from Messrs. Mitchell, Ehrlichman, Haldeman and Dean may throw more light on who is lying and who is telling the truth. Meanwhile, it is probably better to follow Paul Porter's skeptical advice: "I don't say these men are liars," he said the other day. "It's just that they have such respect for the truth that they use it sparingly."

More will come out, for the White House "loyalists" are now trying to save themselves, but enough has already been revealed of the family tragedies to give point to one comment made by Senator Ervin to Mr. Magruder:

"In spite of your very unfortunate state at the present time, you have got about the greatest asset that any man can have; you have a wife who stands behind you in the shadows where the sun shines."