

Watergate:

By Herbert Marcuse

LA JOLLA, Calif.—The treatment of the Watergate scandal has concealed more than it has revealed. With rare exceptions, mainly in the "underground press," the significance of the events has been hidden or minimized by publicizing it as an extraordinary case of corruption in the highest circles of the Government—extraordinary because of its bungling brutality, its violation of elementary constitutional rights. However, this sort of treatment isolates the scandal from the context which makes the extraordinary an ordinary event, not an aberration but the extreme political form of the normal state of affairs.

This context is the present state of American capitalism. It seems that it cannot function, cannot grow any more without the use of illegal, illegitimate means, without the practice of violence in the various branches of the material and intellectual culture. The rule of law, and the political morality stipulated by it, were appropriate to the period of liberal capitalism: the age of free competition and free enterprise. On the open market, certain legal safeguards, generally observed, sufficed to protect private enterprise from undesirable interference; their observance did not unduly hamper good business, nor was free competition under the rule of law altogether detrimental to progress: The competing powers developed the productive forces and provided the goods and services to satisfy the basic needs of an increasing part of the population.

But the picture begins to change with the period of the World Wars. Competition generates oligopolies and monopolies; gradual saturation of the capital market at home leads to an aggressive imperialist policy, and the rapid rise of giant corporate interests transforms ever more independent enterprises into direct or indirect dependencies. At the same time, the growing power of organized labor threatens the corporate dominion, and the sharpening conflicts now demand the intervention of the state which the liberal phase restricted to a minimum: Politics becomes part of business, and vice versa.

The rule of law, the morals of legitimacy, based on the relative equality of competitors and on their general and common interests, becomes, under the changed conditions, an obstacle to business and power, on the one hand, and an inadequate safeguard for the weak on the other. Monopolistic competition and imperialistic expansion become the vehicles of growth on the national as well as international levels; the economy functions through

a series of conspiratorial agreements, and its political counterpart operates through latent or manifest intervention in foreign countries—surreptitious or overt entry.

These tendencies change the composition, function and behavior of the ruling class. To the degree to which it no longer develops but rather distorts and destroys the productive forces, it turns into a vast network (or chain) of rackets, cliques and gangs, powerful enough to bend the law or to break it where existing legislation is not already made or interpreted in their favor. In terms of liberal economics, today's conglomerates and multinational corporations would, by their very structure, exercise conspiratorial and illegitimate power. The difference between the Mafia and legitimate business becomes blurred. The purveyors of violence, as entertainment or as part of the job to be done, find sympathetic response among the underlying population whose character they have shaped.

There is no reason why the political sphere should remain immune from these developments. A wave of political assassinations and assassination attempts has swept the country. The previously progressive institutions of the Republic have been made into barriers against social change, stabilizers of the status quo. The electoral process has long since been dominated by the power of big money, the separation of powers turned into a Presidential dictatorship. The distinction between the office and the office-

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holder, one of the most liberating achievements of Western civilization, has collapsed. Now, not the office of the President, the President himself is taboo; he defines and implements national security. Above right and wrong, his definition and implementation override dissent. He is also above logic; his statements are neither true nor false, they are "operative" or "inoperative."

"Operative" means having force, being in effect; it is neutral to moral values and legal norms. Watergate would have been operative if it would have worked; since it has been bungled, it has become inoperative. And this means that it disrupts the cohesion of the political system: As (and only as) a bungled undertaking, it becomes dangerous, compromising: it comes under the jurisdiction of moral and legal norms; it becomes a series of crimes, offenses. They must be publicized, televised, punished, because at stake are not only the prestige and the efficiency of the Government but also of the society

as a whole—of its "normal" behavior.

But what remains "operative" and unscathed by revelations and exposures of abuse is the notion of national security. The White House insists, understandably, on rigid secrecy to protect sensitive Government documents—insists understandably, for it is precisely this secrecy which protects not only such documents of the Government but also its policy from being revealed in its paranoic aggressiveness. The national security of this country is not now, nor in a foreseeable future, threatened by anyone anywhere in the world—neither at home nor abroad. What may indeed be threatened is the further expansion of the American world empire, and secrecy serves to prevent the people from finding out what is being done to them under a false flag.

Popular awareness of these facts is combatted by the vast intelligence network which makes spying a normal activity. Its extent, its means and its targets stand in no relation to national security; they are an insult to

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the sanity of the people. Reading the documents on the planning and organization of the super-intelligence agency, one must assume that in 1970, students, Panthers, Arabs, etc., were about to take over the country.

No, the vast, secret, illegal intelligence apparatus would not and could not suppress any real threat to national security, but well it could (and indeed did) suppress a threat against the established policy, domestic and foreign. While Congress was surrendering ever more of its balancing and controlling powers to the executive, while intimidation and self-censorship of the media became ever more noticeable, while inflation and unemployment continued unabated, while the power to wage war anywhere in the world was handed over to the President, the militant opposition was concentrated in the New Left.

Even without the full-scale implementation of the "game plan" to hunt down suspects and enemies all over the place, the operation was at least temporarily successful. The student movement has been broken up; the opposition has retreated. Temporarily, because the spirit of 1968-70 lives on, all over the nation, and not only among the young and the intelligentia. And here, the all but irresistible protest against the Watergaters and the Gestapo mentality on the most august levels of Government may well indicate the possibility of changing the course.

This opposition does not come from the left: it comes from those conservative and liberal forces which are still committed to the progressive ideas of the Republic.

It is too early to write the obituary on Watergate, too early to say which side will win. The powers responsible for Watergate may survive; basic tendencies in the capitalist society support them, especially the increasing concentration of power, the amalgamation of big business and politics, the repression of radical dissent fostered by the aggravating economic difficulties.

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