

Joseph Alsop

A Vacation From Watergate

People make a foolish fuss about being a blood donor — as I now/am for my brother, Stewart. It is entirely painless. The company is most agreeable, at least in the laboratory where I give blood at the National Institutes of Health. It has indeed, only one serious drawback.

Being a blood donor makes you into a sort of Siamese twin, in the sense that you cannot be separated for more than a few days from the person who needs your peculiar brand of blood. But like so many seeming-difficulties in this weary world, Siamese twindom has now turned out to have its own advantages.

For going on 40 years as a reporter, in brief, I have always tried to follow every really big story until the bitter, or happy end — at any rate within my own reportorial area. To leave a big story makes me feel downright wicked. Yet Siamese twins cannot choose their own vacation-times. Their vacations are chosen by the doctor. The doctor had to arrange the rotation of two other blood donors that will permit my two weeks' flight from horrible Washington to a refuge in the mountains.

The fortnight allotted by Dr. John Glick begins tomorrow, so these reports will cease for that period. Even so, I might have puritanically refused the vacation if I were not as stale as an old bun — and not just any old bun, but one of the super-stale old buns the archeologists found after 18 centuries in the baker's oven at Pompeii. But to be honest, I was also overjoyed by my vacation's imposed timing, although the Watergate horror is the biggest single political story I have ever seen in 30-plus years in Washington.

As long as I have had to begin with a personal explanation, I may perhaps

continue personally — although I have an old-fashioned distaste for first person-reporting. It is worth explaining why the Watergate horror is not only the biggest political story, but also the most unpleasant to report that I have ever known — which is why I am guiltily overjoyed to be leaving it behind.

It will be well to begin with my own view of President Nixon. I have been accused of being a Nixon "apologist." I have always believed that Richard M. Nixon was the most unlikely President we have ever had, in the sense that he strongly resembles a plumbing fixture. Only foolish people wish to *like or love* their plumbing fixtures.

Speaking for myself, I should much prefer going outdoors to having orchid colored plumbing with gold handles. For any sensible person, the test of a flush-toilet is whether it flushes. Since his election in 1968 (which I voted ardently against, unlike so many present Nixon-haters), I have regarded the President as a reliably flushing plumbing fixture. I have so written, in just those words. If this makes you a Nixon apologist, make the most of it!

The next point is simple enough. If you have reliable plumbing, does any sensible person want to exchange it for the great unknown? The answer is, obviously: "No, unless it is fatally infected in some unseen manner." What we are learning from the Watergate horror is that the White House was indeed infected, not fatally, but in a way that *could* have been fatal.

It was infected because what has always been done in every White House (or at least every strong White House) was turned in the Nixon White House into an elaborately administered system. I myself have seen a felony being cheerfully compounded by a Presi-

dent of the United States, whose loss was one of the greatest losses of my own life. It was vastly to his own advantage but equally to the advantage of this country. I laughed and said nothing.

So maybe I have the wrong standards — since compounding felony is precisely the main charge against President Nixon. Yet when this kind of thing is made into a White House system, it can indeed become fatal. I do not think the system, as it formerly existed in the Nixon White House, was seriously threatening. As the record clearly shows, the managers of the system were such a set of fools, paranooids, brown-nosers, and incompetents that the main threat was to themselves — and to the President. But if the system had been perpetuated, and had been passed on to competent heirs later on, it would have been genuinely dangerous to all we care for.

Destroying the system in its incompetent infancy is the great achievement of the exposure of the Watergate horror, mainly by The Washington Post. But that has been done. The question, now, is whether it is also desirable to destroy the President himself. In the circumstances, I believe he should resign or be impeached if convincingly shown to be guilty as charged. But so far, his sole effective accuser is John W. Dean III, about the nastiest bottom-dwelling slug to surface in our political life since I can remember.

If the President's destruction is not truly desired, however, we are now engaged in a frivolous, self-destructive exercise. I dislike self-destruction. So it is wonderful to be going to the mountains, almost by doctor's orders.