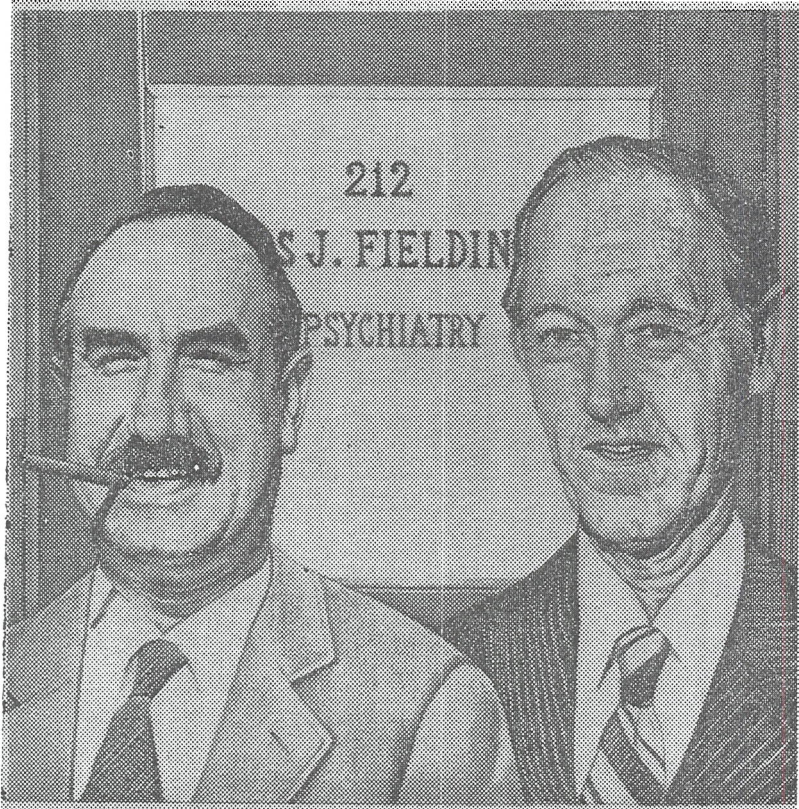


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Drawing by Randall Diehl

The Deeper Meanings

By R. Sargent Shriver

WASHINGTON—Like snow driven by a righteous wind, the evidence of Watergate continues to pile up, straining the limits of the nation's understanding and attention. And with it is a danger that the deeper lessons of this sordid affair will be buried under the drifts of details.

What we need now is not only an investigation of misdeeds but a realization of their deeper meaning.

First, let us say that crime is not an issue of class or race or age. This Administration has tried to make it that. It has twisted law and order into a code for prejudice. It has exploited our worst fears and insinuated that those who are different from the majority are dangerous to our safety. Now its crimes have refuted its own lie.

Consider the Nixon officials who are implicated in Watergate, the White House seventeen. Here they are—the unyoung, unblack and the unpoor. Watergate should put an end to backlash appeals on the crime issue. It should remind all of us that good and evil know no bounds of color, station or time of life. And it should quiet the self-righteous men who are themselves involved in the worst official wrongdoing in American history.

Second, let us say that Watergate is not politics as usual. The President has sought to persuade us that politics is as bad as he and his associates have made it. But George McGovern never laundered a dollar in Mexico. His campaign never burglarized an office, tapped a telephone or falsified a record.

There is a decent tradition in American politics. It is the property of no particular party. It is a tradition sustained and dignified by leaders as diverse as Adlai Stevenson and Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy and Robert Taft. They disagreed about policy, but they believed in the principled conduct of public affairs. Richard Nixon has betrayed that tradition.

Integrity is not as scarce as Mr. Nixon would have us believe. And Watergate would not have happened with a George McGovern or a Hubert Humphrey or an Ed Muskie or a Henry Jackson or a Nelson Rockefeller in the White House. It did happen here—not because politics required that it be so—but because some men made it so.

Third, let us say that the Presidency is not a sanctified place. It brings with it the trappings of power, but not the assurance of rectitude. For too long, too uncritically, we have accepted a mythology, embellished by Presidents themselves, which endows their office with a constitutional significance that would have staggered the Founding Fathers. The Catholic Church has endured bad Popes. England has suffered bad kings—and some of them have been deposed. And both institutions have survived their worst leaders; indeed, they were ancient when America was new. And America will survive the recognition that a President, too, may prove unworthy of power.

Our Constitution sought to perfect a Union, not an office. It was not inconceivable to the men who framed the Constitution that the Presidency and the nation might best be protected at times by the removal of a President. And it is not inconceivable now. The higher patriotism asks more of us than that we rally to the support of a discredited President. It asks instead that we restore the credibility of our leadership even if that means a change of leaders.

Fourth, let us say that Mr. Nixon is not indispensable. We are told that he has been a great President, especially in foreign policy—and we are left with the impression that we would be lost without him. Mr. Nixon's supporters seem to give him total credit for what Henry Kissinger has done and no blame for what has been done by so many others who have worked for him.

The President has stated that we must get to the bottom of the Watergate scandal. I fear that might take us right to the top.

It is argued in Mr. Nixon's defense

that he stands indicted thus far by no more than hearsay and common sense. But surely we hold our Presidents to a higher standard than the mere ability to avoid criminal conviction. Mr. Nixon has said that he accepts responsibility for the illegal and unethical acts committed in his name and by his authority. That is a grave admission. But what is this word "responsible" to mean? A slap on the wrist? A public scolding? A pledge to go and sin no more? No, it is time for Mr. Nixon to confront the full and awful gravity of Watergate. His mind should not be closed to any decent alternative that can repair the damage. And at the least, if he decides to continue in office, he should come before the American people and explain why he has not resigned.

His resignation might be the greatest single contribution he could make to this country's well-being. It need not be an admission of guilt. It could be an act of statesmanship. It would not be the easy thing to do, but it would be the patriotic thing to do.

R. Sargent Shriver was Senator McGovern's running mate in the last Presidential election.