

# Upstaging Nixon, Shadowing Gray

A Commentary  
By Nicholas von Hoffman

Spiro Agnew has gone and done the one thing that Vice Presidents are never supposed to do. He's trying to take attention away from his boss. A Vice President has no right to an independent scandal of his own. It's his constitutional responsibility to content himself with such minor roles in the White House scandals as the President sees fit to assign him.

But no, the man with the eggplant head has rushed forward and issued a statement asserting his innocence even before he's been accused of anything. In further imitation of his boss, he has immodestly gone out and hired himself a criminal lawyer. Who does he think he is?

Having committed himself in this fashion, Vice President Eggplant has either got to substantiate his denials by getting himself indicted and convicted or face the suspicion that he's only throwing mud on himself as a publicity-grabbing ploy to get the Republican nomination in 1976. In either case it's an act of disloyalty to the chief.

Mr. Eggplant's intrusion into the center of media attention has distracted us from concentrating on the last of the pre-Labor Day Watergate witnesses. Sooner or later the Watergate committee was going to find itself a witness who would tell the whole truth and nothing but, and when it did in the person of L. Patrick Gray III, the former submarine captain and FBI director, the Vice President was upstaging him.

The old U-boat commander gave testimony that was so awkward, so damaging to himself, and so downright dumb that the only explanation is that it's true. No liar would be so disingenuous as to say of his handling of important evidence that, "General (Vernon) Walters (deputy director of the CIA) came to my office . . . (and) he apparently gave me a memorandum which, I am now informed, contained information to the effect that the CIA furnished certain aliases to Liddy and Hunt and certain paraphernalia to Hunt. Until I briefly saw a copy of this memorandum this spring . . . containing a notation of its receipt in my handwriting, I had no recollection of this memorandum . . . I am told that the original of this memorandum was found in my safe."

Bad liars make up better stories, but it does make you wonder what the U-boat captain did with everybody's paycheck. This decent, excessively obedient man

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couldn't even find the shredder in his own office. He's salvaged the FBI's reputation for honesty, if not for efficiency. After listening to the U-boat captain explain his meanderings around Washington and Connecticut with the contents of Howard Hunt's White House safe, you can see why the Kaiser lost World War I, and Gray could have 343 FBI agents out conducting 2,347 inter-

views on the Watergate case and still not know who done it. He probably thought he was conducting a Gallup poll, not an investigation of a crime.

"We were all babes in the woods," explained our gallantly inept Hawkshaw the detective. Yet we shouldn't make too much fun of this terribly miscast man. Naval captain, the commander of an atomic submarine, an engineer, a lawyer, honest, patriotic, but utterly lacking in guile, political intuition, leadership and both the know-how and the courage to stand up to superiors, he should never have been appointed to the FBI directorship. A couple of piranhas like Dean and Ehrlichman swallow guys like Gray with their orange juice every morning.

"I shall carry the burden of that act with me always," this unfortunate man said of the burning of the contents of Hunt's safe and then lying about it. He shouldn't. All of us have gotten trapped into situations like that in our lives and told lies about it. It's Dean and Ehrlichman that should bear the burden. They're the ones who deepsixed him, who picked out the old sailor for the job because they knew he'd say aye, aye, sir, because he's always said aye, aye.

The rough, tough Kleindienst is another matter. They tried to pull some of the same kind of tricks on him, and the ex-Attorney General and loyal member of the Phoenix Trunk and Tusk Club told them to stuff it. Kleindienst has also disposed of another question the senators have put to so many witnesses: If you knew this or that, why didn't you tell the President? Kleindienst did. At several key junctures when he had important information, he called up and said, "I gotta see ya, Dick."

Maybe later on we will be disappointed by new and pejorative information about Kleindienst, but let's hope

not. In the long train of weaklings, bagmen, perjurers, burglars and high- and low-level finks that have slid into that witness chair, Kleindienst and his former assistant, Henry Peterson, have been the most impressive and persuasive, not only in their testimony but as people. Finally we get two guys who dare to sit at the table and face Senator Sam without needing a lawyer by their side.

Strange, too, that Peterson, the Democrat, and Gray and Kleindienst, neither of whom seem to regard Nixon as one of our greater Presidents, should make the best witness for him. They did more to exculpate him by telling the truth than all his loyalists have done by lying.

It's an up-beat end to the first phase of the hearings. Nobody wants to believe our President is crooked and neo-fascist and a scoundrel. Doubtless this brief good impression will be wiped away by President Trustworthy's umteenth Watergate statement which is supposed to be unleashed on us soon. Either that or Vice President Eggplant will be indicted for stealing the national beef supply.

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