



SFChronicle

The Crisis in America

Washington

PIERRE Salinger was back in town the other day, exuding cigar smoke and theories with equal facility.

The former press secretary to John F. Kennedy has been working for L'Express, a Paris newspaper, and was here to do a piece entitled "America in Crisis."

Swinging his black penny loafers onto his hotel bed, the bushy-browed Salinger started talking on subjects ranging from Watergate to the investigation of the vice president to the JFK administration to Ted Kennedy's chances in '76.

"The French have a Machiavellian theory," he said, referring to the probe of Spiro Agnew.

"They think Nixon is trying to force Agnew to resign. If he does, Nixon can appoint a more suitable vice president who is sure to carry out his plans, and then resign himself.

"They're basing their idea on rumors that were floating around Washington two months ago, but they see the Agnew investigation in terms of the rumors coming to fruition. Of course, the French love intrigue and conspiracy."

Salinger does not buy that theory. He believes it isn't inconceivable that the President has decided to place Agnew in the shadow of scandal to prevent his own impeachment.

"How can the country impeach a president whose own vice president is under investigation?" he asks.

His research for his current article makes him feel Americans are less concerned with Watergate than inflation and high prices.

"They resent Watergate and they resent Nixon, but they don't want to see a president impeached, so they sit back, grumble and do nothing."

The French, he adds are not much different.

"They cannot understand all the American fuss over Watergate. To them, this sort of thing is a way of life. Certainly, phone tapping doesn't disturb the French.

"There are over 1000

phone taps on private citizens, including me, in Paris. It's a perfectly open thing. In fact, one of the French ministers recently dedicated a phone tapping center in Paris, cut the ribbon and all.

"Just the French businessmen are concerned. They see Watergate undermining the confidence in the dollar and the world monetary situation becoming increasingly precarious.

"But my cab driver in Paris the other day praised Nixon for his detente with the Soviet Union and China and declared Watergate to be a vindication of the American system. And my own magazine has been hitting the French government for pushing its scandals under the table instead of operating like America."

Salinger's own feelings on Watergate and Nixon are perfectly clear.

"What disturbs me most is how it portrays the mentality of these men and of Nixon himself. I've been saying for 20 years that Nixon is a haunted, paranoid man who thinks everyone is out to get him.

"He was traumatized in '47 during the Hiss case. He said the liberals were out to get him. In '52, he was traumatized when his slush fund was discovered. In '60, he was traumatized because he thought the election was stolen. (I'm not commenting if it's true or not.)

"Then he got to the point where he was traumatized by one demonstrator outside the White House fence.

"I think all the Watergate activities, the domestic intelligence plans, the buggaries, the bugging, are just a reflection of those fears. And I think the whole scandal would have passed over if he had had the good judgment to separate himself from his political friends like (John) Ehrlichman and

(Bob) Haldeman right away."

Salinger bristles at the suggestion that similar tactics, such as harassment of

reporters, might have been used by JFK. For example, didn't Kennedy try to have David Halberstam fired by the New York Times for writing unfavorable Vietnam stories?

"It's true," says Salinger. "I tried to stop him, I told him it was a mistake, but he called the Times himself and insisted they fire Halberstam. He said later he realized it was a mistake."

And didn't Kennedy tape conversations in his office, without the participants' knowledge?

"Yes, he taped conversations concerning the Bay of Pigs because of the historical significance. He probably didn't tell the people in the room."

And what about certain coverups? Did Kennedy ask the Times to suppress information it had on the Bay of Pigs invasion?

"I don't know about the Bay of Pigs, except that the Times had been printing long stories about covert operations that were taking place in Cuba, like training insurgents, and Kennedy asked them not to print any more.

"But I do know firsthand of two other cases when the White House asked the stories not be printed.

"One concerned the release of two American pilots who had been shot down when their plane strayed over Soviet territory. The New York Herald Tribune had the information that they were about to be released.

"When Kennedy learned of it, he called Jock Whitney and asked him not to print it or Khrushchev might call off the deal.

"Kennedy scooped the Trib himself. He announced the release at a press conference the next day."

The second case concerned the Cuban missile crisis.

"The New York Times and Washington Post both

were aware that Russians had placed missiles in Cuba and were planning the story for their morning editions. The president personally called and asked them to hold off their stories until our fleet had a chance to get into position.

"They did, because they knew releasing their information could affect national security. I think it's interesting that the same two papers were asked by Nixon not to print the Pentagon Papers. They refused because they knew those papers would not jeopardize national security."

Salinger says there is much Kennedy nostalgia in the air, something he feels will help Senator Edward Kennedy in 1976.

"I think he'll run," says Salinger.

What about Chappaquiddick and the appearance of such bumper stickers as "Nobody Drowned at Watergate?"

"Chappaquiddick was a personal tragedy," replies Salinger.

"It happened to involve a United States senator, but it did not involve a president of the United States in the process of carrying out his constitutional responsibilities.

"Yes, I know there was a covering letter from the judge on the Kennedy testimony, saying he didn't believe Kennedy's story, but at least the testimony was made public. And Kennedy did not have to be subpoenaed; he voluntarily turned himself in.

"They may be talking Chappaquiddick in Washington, but just go outside the nation's capital. They'd take Kennedy for president any day. He's the last living heir. He's got the name. He's been a good senator."

With the tenth anniversary of John Kennedy's death coming up in November, so are lots of Kennedy books and TV documentaries.

"John Kennedy opened the latter half of the 20th Century and set the country mov-

ing in a positive direction. I think most of the cynicism in the country today dates from his assassination.

"There is a crisis of leadership in the country now that can only be filled by a

leader who can restore confidence, unite, restore checks and balances, who does not just ride roughshod over everyone, including Congress, and even his own cabinet members — and

who is not shielded from opinion that might be unpleasant.

"The country needs someone gifted with leadership who understands American history and who can set

Nixon and twirls his cigar with a mischievous look.

"Maybe what this country needs is a few good old-fashioned cigar-smoking, martini-drinking men."

Women's Wear Daily

a high moral standard."

"Besides, who else have they got?"

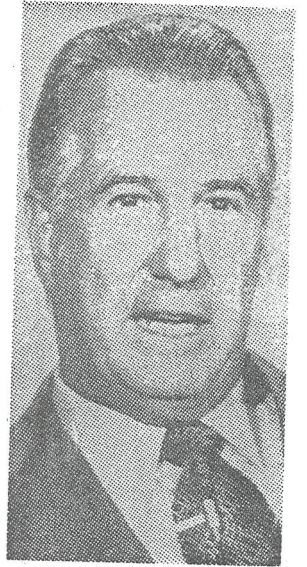
Then Pierre pauses to think for a minute about the puritanical men surrounding



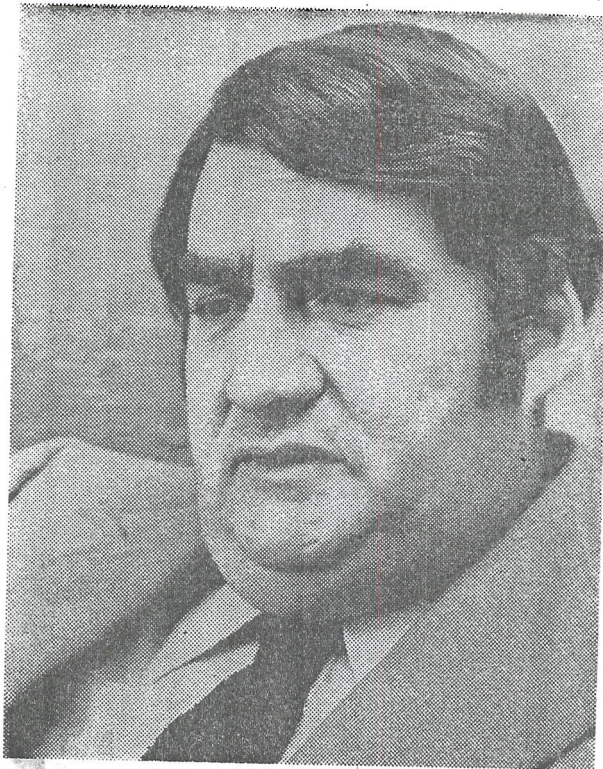
DAVID HALBERSTAM
JFK's mistake



TED KENNEDY
"The last living heir"



SPIRO AGNEW
The shadow theory?



FORMER JFK AIDE PIERRE SALINGER
The French don't understand the fuss