

The Fearless Spectator

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How Dumb Can You Get?

THE WATERGATE testimony of the recently indicted Mr. John Ehrlichman, as has often been pointed out, was pretty frightening stuff to innocents who still believed we were living in a free country under a government of laws. Not so long ago Ehrlichman and his two superiors, Haldeman and President Nixon, were the three horses abreast drawing the troika of government.

Yet, in a curious way, Ehrlichman's little lectures and large prevarications before the Senate have in retrospect a kind of assuring quality. For Mr. Ehrlichman was a stupid man. It is not often such men go as far as he did, even in the ways of evil. It is astonishing how far he got; but that is another story.

Consider his now-famous remarks on booze in the Senate, which show quite fully the distance between the White House and reality, in those bad old days of '69-'72. With only the slightest of prompting, Ehrlichman lectured the Senate committee:

"You can go over here in the gallery and watch a member totter onto the floor in a condition of at least partial inebriation . . . I think it important for the American people to know," he continued, "and if the only way it can be brought out is through his opponent in a political campaign, then I think that opponent has an affirmative obligation to bring that forward."

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IN THE HALLS of Congress, those sentiments were worthy of a refugee from a lamasery; but scarcely of the chief adviser on domestic politics to an American President. If people began snitching on who guzzled in the Senate and House, or had ladies, and even gentlemen, on the wrong side of the bed, an interesting *binartisan* chaos would soon result.



There is a theory in some profane quarters that Mr. Nixon liked to surround himself with Christian Scientists (both Ehrlichman and Haldeman profess Mrs. Eddy's church) in the same way an equally fearful Howard Hughes likes to surround himself with Mormons. No smokee, no drinkee, no talkee. With such stern innocents around, the theory goes, news of the merger will never get out before time, to influence the price.

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THERE IS much to be said for this view. Guzzling in Congress and the agencies is almost as American as blueberry pie. Which is why there is almost no such thing as a secret in Washington. Drunks feel important when they tell on their betters. I, for one, would never have a drinking Irishman in on the tail end of a sensitive negotiation, though I would trust him to set it up and carry it forward.

But Mr. Ehrlichman was not being anything so sophisticated. He wasn't really talking about senatorial drunks. He was talking about *Democratic* senatorial drunks. In his righteousness, it did not for an instant occur to him that he was placing a weapon in the hands of his politician enemies while he was denouncing them.

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EHRlichman's timing wasn't what you'd call great, either. His testimony followed by mere days the extended appearance of a former cabinet member of Ehrlichman's own party who is notorious in Washington as a lush. Anyone who knew the stigmata of the drunk who hasn't yet dried out must have felt mighty uncomfortable as this Republican eminento fumbled through his chore. Shaking fingers, rheumy eyes, shifty incoherency, then the sudden remarkable recovery after lunch and, a fellow toper would guess, a triad of life-enhancing martinis or whatever.

And this chappie is far from the only alcoholic or sodomite or mainliner who marches under the elephant's flag. Republicans as well as Democrats labor under the disability of being human. In paleolithic 1939, labor leader John L. Lewis called Vice President Garner a "labor-baiting, poker-playing, whisky-drinking evil old man."

Old Texas John whinnied like a hyena when he heard that one. Lewis knew, and so did Garner, that the only epithet that counted was "labor-baiting." Things weren't like that in the Era of Sanctimony, when Nixon-Haldeman-Ehrlichman pulled the sled. R.I.P., let us hope.