

*William Raspberry*

# Corruption Without Precedent

They're lying to us, you know. Or rather they're making us lie to ourselves, making us say that all politicians are crooks and thieves and that we've always known it.

They do it because it's their best protection. They've passed the point where they can convince us of their innocence, so they accomplish their exonerated by making it appear that guilt is so universal among politicians that it is useless to talk about cleaning up our government.

Why talk about throwing out any particular political rascal when his prospective replacement is, by definition, a rascal, too?

Well, it's not true. Not all politicians are crooks and thieves. Not all politics is dirty. Not all administrations are corrupt.

We have got to stop lying to ourselves and face up to the fact that this scandal-ridden national government is without precedent in American history. We know that when we stop to think of what used to constitute scandal: a few vicuna coats and deep-freezes, for instance, or a penny-ante Nixon slush fund. Even Teapot Dome, which shows up in the history books as a sort of low-watermark of political scandal, was nothing more than a money rip-off.

The current scandals involve money, too, of course. But they also involve systematic deception of the people, systematic subversion of government agencies and even of the Constitution, and systematic consolidation of power.

It's hard to remember now, but Watergate used to mean nothing more

than the subversion of the electoral process—dirty politics—although even that attempt at subversion was of unprecedented scope.

But in later months, it came to encompass the President's secret police (the "plumbers") operating outside the law and specifically authorized to commit such crimes as burglary, illicit wiretaps; attempts to force CIA officials to implicate their agency in the scandals so as to limit the scope of the investigation; perjured testimony of high administration officials, and a variety of other crimes and improprieties, including milk deals, wheat deals, laundered cash and Lord knows what else.

And beyond the generic Watergate, there are the matters of the San Clemente deal, the tax write-off on a phony gift of Nixon papers, the Hughes-Rebozo funny money thing, and on and on. And that doesn't even count the Agnew disgrace or the fact that two former Cabinet officers are facing trial right now.

There may be precedents for some individual pieces of this scandal, but the package of them is unprecedented in size or boldness. And through it all, President Nixon seemed far less interested in discovering the breadth of the scandal than in keeping the rest of us from finding out.

No, this is not scandal as usual. It is much closer to being an attempted (and very nearly successful) *coup d'etat*. For while the Watergate scandals and so-called White House Horrors were going on, something else was under way: a process of power consolidation that began with an innocent-ap-

pearing reorganization of the Executive Branch into strong and weak Cabinet agencies, with lines of authority running directly to the White House through the installation of former White House aides as assistant secretaries; that included the appointment of Nixon men to the Supreme Court; and that involved an attack on a derelict Congress, the third branch of government, through a combination of veto and impoundment.

And finally, the man was ready to declare himself above the law, immune to court orders and legal process. Not just over the Watergate tapes, either. The nation's war-making powers are supposed to belong to Congress. But the President proceeded to bomb hell out of neutral Cambodia without congressional consent, and then concealed the fact of the bombing from Congress. And incidentally, from you and me.

Political hanky-panky and a little money changing hands? No, sir. No, m'am. They stole the government from us. No: *He* stole the government from us, and then tricked us into silly debates over executive privilege and tape recordings.

And now they're trying to make us believe that the country cannot endure the only process the Constitution provides for reclaiming our government. Impeachment is such a cataclysmic thing, you know.

Well, don't you believe it. The cataclysm has happened, and the only reasonable questions now are those that deal with the mechanics of impeachment.