

Unfunny Deal

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

Having promised not to destroy the evidence this time, the FBI has re-entered the case. It will shortly surround the White House and will be telling Rose Mary to throw down her Uher and come out with her hands up.

If she is led off in chains, it doesn't mean she did anything wrong. Those second-class Borgias she works for may be setting her up, or it could be their code of honor prescribes that the little people walk the plank first. Eighteen months after the great break-in and not one high level person has been indicted yet. Is it time now to offer us Rose Mary either as entertainment or proof that the system is working? Thus far for culprits, they've given us Cuban-American locksmiths and young men two years out of law school who use Clearasil before committing their crimes.

None of this is worth getting worked up over. As most conspiracies fail they look progressively less sinister and more comic. The last big plot we had in Washington was joke material by the time it had been exposed.

The year was 1934 and the money behind it came, as best it could be traced, from companies controlled by J. P. Morgan, the DuPonts, the Rockefellers, the Mellons. It appeared that some members of these famously rich families, like J. Howard Pew of Sun Oil, knew where their dough was going, but the facts were never firmly established by the House of Representatives' committee. The committee, chaired by John McCormack, later to become Speaker of the House, was content to let the plot dissipate without chasing down the wealthy plotters.

Viewed from two generations later in our time with our troubles, the conspiracy looks as idiotically incomprehensible as Watergate may to our grandchildren. Nevertheless, the conspirators of '34 believed that Franklin Roosevelt, the man who saved corporate capitalism, was intent on destroying them, and that they were therefore entitled to do the same to him. It is hard to conceive that businessmen could think of FDR as a devil, but will it be any easier in the future to understand why Kissinger and the Pentagon brass were bugging each other's phones?

Watergate is less a simple, discreet plot than it is an example of conspiracy as a normal way of life. There never was one single plan either to do anything or to cover anything up. Watergaters hatch plots and hide them with the same rapid fecundity that waterbugs and toads drop larvae on green slime pools.

By contrast the 1934 plot is easy to understand. A paramilitary force of a half a million ex-World War I veterans was to be recruited and marched to Washington to overawe Roosevelt and force him to appoint a quasi-dictator type as Secretary of General Affairs. This superordinate Cabinet member would assume the president's powers while Roosevelt was to be allowed to continue to live in the White House and function as our equivalent of the king of England.

To recruit this black shirt army the plotters needed a well known, forceful military figure, preferably one who had some experience at political gang bang. They chose Marine Maj. Gen. Smedley Darlington Butler, a two-time winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor and the most popular soldier of his era. In those days, the Marines did many of the jobs the CIA does now, so in the course of his career, Gen. Butler had learned to stuff ballot boxes, rig elections and promulgate spurious constitutions in places like Nicaragua and Haiti. For more, see "The Plot To Seize the White House" by Jules Archer, Hawthorn Books, 1973.)

What the plotters failed to appreciate was that over the years the general had come to detest playing politics with machine guns. "I spent 33 years being a high class muscle man of Big Business," the general said in his most memorable quote, "I was a racketeer for capitalism. I helped purify Nicaragua for the international banking house of Brown Brothers in 1909. I helped make Mexico safe for American oil interests in 1916. I brought light to the Dominican Republic for American sugar interests. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenue in. In China in 1927 I helped see to it that Standard Oil went its way unmolested. I had a swell racket. I was rewarded with honors, medals, promotions. I might have given Al Capone a few hints. The best he could do was to operate in three cities. The Marines operated on three continents."

Old Gimlet Eye, as his men called Butler, destroyed the plot by making it public. The conspirators slipped back into their Manhattan offices and hid under the desks. Nobody was indicted, nobody jailed, and the principals were gentlemanly enough not to pin the rap on their office boys or secretaries.