

Jesuits on Watergate

Following are excerpts from an editorial that appeared July 21, 1973, in the magazine *America*, published by Jesuits of the United States and Canada. It was titled "A White House Homily—Undelivered" and dealt with the "moral crisis" of Watergate.

Mr. President, members of the White House family:

To remind ourselves that there are important moral issues involved in the complicated history emerging from the Senate hearings might seem unnecessary. It is all too obvious that blackmail, invasion of privacy, bribery, perjury, defamation of character, all involve moral values. Yet one of the chilling revelations has been the complete absence of moral concern at any stage of the conspiracy. The questions asked were pragmatic; the doubts and hesitations concerned expense or deniability. No one asked: Is this just and good?

It is important to be clear on what kind of moral issue was involved. The men of Watergate were not playboys of permissiveness but true believers in the work of ethic. In the words of one of their colleagues, men of high private morality but lacking in a sense of public morality.

Prestige, money, advancement, the usual idols of the "American dream," were not completely absent from the motivation of the conspirators. Yet for all that, Watergate still represents a new kind of political corruption. American politics has known before men who abused positions of power for private gain. The Watergate conspiracy betrayed the public trust in more deadly fashion. It stole our birthright.

The actual incident of June 17, 1972, was no isolated adventure. It was part of a deliberate plan to subvert the process of democratic election. When those who broke the law were apprehended, some of the most highly placed men in the Government attempted to enlist Government institutions in a conspiracy against justice. If all this were simply an excess of campaign zeal, the result would be tragic enough. The apparent mandate the President received in November would be forever stained by the tactics employed in its pursuit. These tactics, however, cannot be isolated from the philosophy of the White

House for the past five years.

There is much pressure at the present time, Mr. President, to determine who was ultimately responsible for Watergate in its various phases. The possibility of your personal involvement poses an embarrassing dilemma even for your friends. If you were aware of the conspiracy, you have participated in a crime. If you were unaware of the conspiracy, which touched at one point or another the most important personalities and agencies in your Government, then the failure in leadership is, in a sense, even more disturbing.

As serious as this dilemma is, however, it is not the most important question to be asked. The crisis the nation faces, regardless of your particular role in the Watergate conspiracy, is still rooted in the fundamental mentality of your Administration. It is a mentality that could be described as absolute righteousness, holding itself above and beyond the law. Absolute righteousness quickly becomes absolute ruthlessness.

Basically this mentality rests on the mistaken assumption that the origin of legitimate power in Government is the White House and not the people of the United States. The result is that the men you selected and inspired, Mr. President, used the tactics of the police state to meet what they describe as threats of national security. The plans for domestic intelligence-gathering launched by your Administration, the special investigative unit attached to the White House and privately financed, illegal wiretapping, illegal entry, the use of tax audits against political opponents, the withholding and falsifying information given to the public—these were the real dangers to national security, the real subversion. An Administration parading under the banner of law and order, considered itself above the law.

How could this happen? Did the mistake lie in a fondness for the corporation mystique, an admiration for the methods of men who made money? Was the mistake to impose the techniques of American business on the process of American Government? Was there too much of the image-maker's concern with selling the product, along with his occupational cynicism about telling the truth?