

ART HOPPE



The Nixon Haters

The White House is noticeably smaller these days. It's been set back farther from the street. The iron gridded fence around it has grown higher, though, and the spikes atop are honed razor sharp.

Occasionally at night the glimmer of a shaded light can be seen through a bolted shutter. So someone still holds out within. But the grinning wolves are circling, circling. And each day they grow ever bolder.

★ ★ ★

"PEOPLE always said they didn't like the son of a bitch but they didn't know why," says a reporter in the White House press room. "Now they know why."

He doesn't bother to lower his voice though a presidential aide is passing by. The aide's shoulders hunch forward. His head ducks. He keeps going, staring straight ahead. Silent. The other newsmen laugh.

You can't blame the aide. Those few in this town who still openly defend the President, like Father John McLaughlin, the Jesuit priest on the White House staff, are subject to instant derision. It simply isn't the thing to do.

The White House press has been wryly critical in private of every President since FDR. Cynicism is issued with their pencils and notebooks. But never have they been so openly and fearlessly hostile, never have their jokes been so vicious nor delivered with such relish. It simply is the thing to do.

This is basically a Democratic town. The newsmen, the upper-echelon bureaucrats, the Georgetown hostesses — those who set the tone, evoke the mood, determine what is in and what is out — are not only predominantly Democrats,

but intellectual Democrats. Since the days of Alger Hiss, they have been Nixon haters.

When the President was at the height of his power, they criticized him. But they criticized him for being dull and banal, and only among themselves. It seemed a meaningless ritual they went through to help them endure the eight long years in hopes that Camelot would come again. But now . . .

"As the President would say," a Democratic congressman loudly asked the waiter in the House dining room, "what the (expletive deleted) is good today?"

A Republican colleague at the next table looked over, smiled ruefully and sadly shook his head. "Even the Republicans know they've been had," said the Democrat triumphantly.

"Did you hear what he called (Senate Republican Leader) Hugh Scott?" said a lawyer at a cocktail party, happily citing an obscenity deleted from the tape transcripts, this town's best-seller. And the other guests vied to bring forth plums of presidential profanity, as though profanity were an impeachable offense.

And you can't help feeling in this atmosphere of viciousness, vindictiveness and jubilant relish that if the President is driven from office in disgrace, it will not be so much for any high crimes or misdemeanors, but simply because this town hates his guts.

★ ★ ★

Yet Lincoln still broods in his memorial. As you walk down Pennsylvania avenue, the flags still bravely fly, the granite and the marble buildings still stand strong and enduring. And you think this lynch-mob aberration will pass.

For Capitol Hill is noticeably higher now, dome more dominant and imposing. It is noisier, too, as the revelers within quaff from the heady cup of power after a long, long drought.

And maybe there is an Architect who watches over our democracy. And maybe what we are undergoing is the excruciatingly painful process of having our institutions scaled back to size.