



By John Twohey

Doing What Comes Naturally

AN AMERICAN LIFE: One Man's Road to Watergate. By Jeb Stuart Magruder. Atheneum. 338 pp. \$10

By JAMES FALLOWS

JEB STUART MAGRUDER, who went to federal prison early this month to start serving his 10-month to four-year sentence, has produced the first participant's report on Watergate. The insights and the limitations of this fascinating book illustrate the different kinds of lessons penitents can teach about their crime.

First, as a whodunit, Magruder's book has little to add on that preoccupying question, Did Nixon Know? For the record, Magruder does say at one point, "Based on my knowledge of how the White House operated, I would suspect that once the burglars were arrested, Nixon immediately demanded and got the full story, and that thereafter he kept in close personal touch with the cover-up operation. . . ."

Magruder does not dwell on this point, which is all to the good. Studying the Watergate record merely to find out what Richard Nixon said on a certain day is, as a friend of mine remarked recently, like reading "Julius Caesar" to find out when Brutus gained knowledge of the conspir-

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acy. Obviously there are more interesting lessons which concern the characters' thoughts and motivations and, more generally, the frame of mind that prevailed in their world.

To these questions Magruder does have some answers, and as a window on the Nixon White House, his book is rich and absorbing. Magruder discusses not just the prelude to Watergate, but also many of the issues which used to be considered major—the Carswell nomination, the handling of domestic dissent, the hesitant openings to youth and the intellectuals.

The book is also a treasure house of gossip about the administration's leading figures. Magruder's main enemies are Charles Colson, Fred Malek and Gordon Liddy, and he undoes them all with devastating anecdotes. He also has harsh things to say about John Dean, H.R. Haldeman, Ron Ziegler and many others, and warm words for Fred LaRue, Herb Klein and John Mitchell, who emerges as the one truly tragic character in the whole company.

Magruder's precarious stance as a trustworthy witness (he has spent a lot of time lying before grand juries) is shakiest in these characterizations. When he describes the cover-up he sticks close to the public record, but his colorful sidelights on his colleagues are not only difficult to verify, but are also slightly suspect since they nearly always make him come out on the side of the reasonable, good-hearted angels.

The Nixon White House, as Magruder portrays it, had its idiosyncracies—the

president's abhorrence of personal contact with his assistants, for example, or the plans to establish a think tank called the "Silent Majority Institute." But the overwhelming impression this book leaves is that the folkways of the Nixon administration were not that different from those of the last few Democratic administrations—that is, they are traits common to the executive branch rather than specific to its present incumbents.

There are too many examples to mention, but a few are particularly important: the promotions and success awaiting those who say what the boss wants to hear (this, Magruder says, was Colson's forte); the emotions aroused by disputes over administrative turf (Ziegler went into a panic when Magruder sent out a fake memo saying that reporters should deal directly with the president and not go through Ziegler); and the euphoric effect of the perquisites of office (some of Magruder's friends grew attached to the White House limousines; when others got aboard Air Force One with the president, "Something would happen to them . . . that made them feel God-like (and) they would invariably begin to rain down calls upon us mere mortals back on earth, and there was no way to talk to them or reason with them." Magruder also emphasizes how much of the administration's business was done by indirection—the raised eyebrow here and the cryptic instruction there, a point of some importance to the House Judiciary Committee as it strains to find incriminating evidence on the tapes. (Continued on page 4)

Magruder

(Continued from page 1)

These and other traits of the Nixon White House have become the stuff of dinner table conversations over the last year, but it is not often enough remembered that the same temptations would be there to plague even an administration of saints. They are permanent problems of government rather than temporary aberrations, and demand more permanent solutions than impeachment.

Finally, the book has an ethical message—as the Watergate committee kept asking last summer, how did all these clean young men go wrong? Magruder at-

tempts to answer the question. As the book's title indicates, he would like to work his own experiences into a parable of all-American success-and-failure.

The attempt does not come off, both because Magruder never picks up or develops the themes of motivation and ambition he introduces in the first few chapters, and because he is weirdly erratic in his own self-perception. Now and then he comes up with an insight that rings perfectly true. In one chilling passage, he tells what his infamy was doing to his children. In another, he tells how it felt to be the object of public scorn and to win Esquire's "Brown-nose of the year" award.

More often, Magruder either avoids introspection, or when he goes in for it, wallows deep in platitudes. Near the end of the book he wraps it all up by saying, "I

and many members of my generation placed far too much emphasis on our personal ambitions, on achieving success, as measured in materialistic terms, and far too little emphasis on moral and humanistic values."

As statements like that may indicate, the book leaves us without any simple ethical handle on the men who made Watergate. And that, in the end, may be the real significance of the book. Even if the *capo* of this organization is an unusual moral specimen, most of the people who worked for him were aggressively usual. No University of Southern California "devil theory" can account for what happened to them. The only thing that can is scrutiny of their leader, which we are getting, and of the White House culture, of which we are still getting too little. □