

# Letters to the Editor

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## Scandals of the Past: The Difference

To the Editor:

The recent claim by Richard Nixon that the scandals afflicting his Administration are substantively no different from those of other eras is one that most historians would find difficult to accept. Watergate is different, not only in scope but in kind, from the Credit Mobilier of the Grant regime or Teapot Dome during the Harding era.

In the earlier scandals, the American public found its national resources being sold by highly placed Government officials to the highest bidders, with the money going not to the Treasury, but into private pockets. In the lesser thefts of the two eras, businessmen bribed Federal officials in order to secure a variety of otherwise unattainable benefits. Watergate is different.

First, neither Grant nor Harding took any part in the scandals that rocked their Administrations; rather they were the dupes of friends they appointed to high Government offices. The only charge that could be lodged against them is that of cronyism. Richard Nixon, on the other hand, seems to have played an active role in many of the incidents under investigation. If he did not instigate the original Watergate burglary, he appears to have been heavily involved in the cover-up operations.

Second, while the conduct of officials in the Grant and Harding Administrations was certainly deplorable, it did little more than manifest an extreme position that a party system so heavily intertwined with private benefactors often reaches. They were crooks, pure and simple, and all they wanted was money. Certainly the corruption of the electoral process, the use of the F.B.I. and the I.R.S. to get at "political ene-

mies," the invasion of privacy through illegal wiretaps and the subversion of civil rights are all far more dangerous to a democratic society than the crime of larceny, even on the grand scale of Teapot Dome.

In the third place, of all American political scandals, only Watergate has touched off a constitutional confrontation unseen since before the Civil War. Even Franklin Roosevelt, when faced by an intransigent Supreme Court, attempted to deal with the problem through legal machinery and, when faced by a huge public outcry, immediately retreated. Grant made no effort to block investigations, and while Harding died before the scandals erupted, Calvin Coolidge supported the special investigators and subsequent criminal action against the culprits.

Nixon, however, has defied the Congress and the courts, fired an investigator he appointed himself, has done all he could to thwart the work of the second special investigator, all the time arrogating powers to the Presidency far from the concepts of the Founding Fathers. Even as the House prepares to deal with impeachment, the virulent attacks by the White House are designed to undermine the one constitutional safeguard provided against abuse of the nation's highest office.

There is a difference between Watergate and earlier scandals, and that difference is that Watergate involves not a mere effort at lining the pockets of friendly businessmen but is an effort to undermine the very processes of a free and democratic society.

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Delmar, N. Y., July 24, 1974