

My Little White Lie

by Herbert L. Porter

I'VE SAID I WOULDN'T DO THIS, but here I go with "Confessions of a Poor Son of a Bitch," or "Porter on the Rack." What changed my mind? A phone call from *Harper's* on the very day that I read TRB's syndicated column in the *Los Angeles Times* wherein that writer repeated the popular refrain that the "tragic victims of Watergate are the *ruined young men* [who] came to serve the President and were corrupted by their superiors [*italics mine*]." Compassionate? Don't be misled. TRB and a number of his lesser brethren are not really mourning for us, the hollow men, the plastic, the faceless, the bird-brained, the well-tailored robots. Listen to his next sentence: "Some were innocents, but most were of the corruptible type—crowd followers, team-players, genuflectors to authority."

Finally, after a really cruel comparison of the ruined young men's social poise and comfortable backgrounds with the President's lack of either, the columnist got around to naming *three* of these well-born but hapless fellows, starting with "Bart Porter, 36, clean-cut, a nice face, a wife and all that; 30 days in jail." Well, I have news for TRB and any other Weeping Willies with the same ax to grind. *Bart Porter is not a ruined young man*. I can say without pretense that I do not regret what has happened to me. Had I made this statement earlier, I would have been guilty of gross self-deception or, at least, whistling in the dark. But I can say it now and mean it. Certainly I do not condone nor do I defend the lapses in judgment that led to my difficulties. Nevertheless, I stand unashamed today, proud of the way family and friends stood by during my time of troubles. I am a far, far stronger person now than I was two years ago. Members of my family and many of my friends have grown through the sharing of my experience.

Though they could never really know or feel my pain, neither could I always know theirs as they bled with me.

I shall cherish forever the hundreds of letters received from friends, friends of friends, casual acquaintances, and complete strangers from all over the country. Some wrote after my appearance before the Senate Investigating Committee, others after my guilty plea, and scores of others, God bless them, while I was doing my twenty-five-day stint at the Federal Prison Camp at Lompoc, California.

IT IS NOT TOO DIFFICULT to reconstruct the events that led up to the situation in which I found myself in April 1973. God knows I spent enough time thinking them through, wondering how something that seemed like such a little white lie at the time could have grown into the nightmare that it finally became. How did it all happen?

It began in the fall of 1970 in Phoenix, Arizona, where I was an executive in a small computer company that had just been sold. Our house was on the market preparatory to our moving to the Bay Area to be near our new headquarters when I received a call from an old University of Southern California friend in Washington, D.C. "The President is coming to Phoenix," he said, "and we want you to help with the arrangements." That was all I needed.

Under the direction of one of the regular White House advance men, a major rally was put together in just three days. Over 10,000 people jammed into the armory to hear the President give his now-famous "Phoenix law-and-order speech." It turned out to be an operation-was-successful-but-the-patient-died sort of thing. But I had done my job

HARPER
10/74

well and a few days later was asked to come to Washington.

The decision to leave the business world to go to Washington was not difficult to make. To begin with, I had been in love with that city for years—the exhilaration, the feeling of excitement. The sense of history, the aura of mystery. Things happening that I wanted to know about.

I'll never forget my first visit during spring vacation from prep school. I was fascinated, transfixed. I could scarcely eat for watching the people in restaurants. Who were they? What did they do? What decisions were they making? What foreign intrigue was taking place under my very eyes? I was ecstatic.

Such enthusiasm was not unusual in teen-agers during the Fifties, but I never lost mine. On each subsequent visit, during college, during my Quantico station, and later when I rushed in and out on business trips, always, always there was that old schoolboy feeling of excitement and anticipation.

MY FIRST FEW MONTHS at the White House were spent in the office of the Director of Communications, Herb Klein. I remember that my mother in California had held high hopes that I would be assigned to Robert Finch, then counselor to the President, who, she felt, would be an ideal tutor for her neophyte son because of his reputation as a Republican moderate. But this was not to be.

I enjoyed working with Mr. Klein. He was a kind man, and extremely patient. But above all he had a reputation for total honesty. I often felt that efforts by others on the White House staff to undermine Herb's position would some day come back to haunt them. Herb had been in the newspaper business for years and understood the press better than anybody in Washington. At least he had credibility with a majority of the editors and publishers around the country, and he was sought after as a spokesman for the administration more than anybody who worked for the President. I can't help believing that, had Herb been given the authority he needed, the President's relations with the press and media would have been much better than they were.

Much has been written about Messrs. Haldeman and Ehrlichman's capacity for chewing up opponents or any individuals who were a potential threat to their power. Well-known, too, was the isolation of the President. If this was disconcerting to many of us younger men who had been accustomed to a more filial relationship with

superiors in our business careers, it was certainly great cause for frustration among the older men. The contempt in which H and E seemed to hold their subordinates certainly did not endear them to many. It was only later that I was to realize their capacity for *misusing* subordinates, particularly the younger, more inexperienced men. Although I have long since shed any emotional resentment I held toward this treatment, I am still mentally and spiritually appalled. It was so *cold*.

As for the President himself, I occasionally passed him in the halls, but he never recognized me after I had been introduced to him. He rarely recognized anybody, so I wasn't hurt—just slightly baffled. I had been naive enough to think that politicians made a point of remembering names and faces.

By the time I was transferred from the White House to the Committee to Re-Elect the President in May of 1971, I had a headful of palace gossip, I thought in terms of *we/they*, and I could chant, "Four legs good, two legs bad," with the best of Orwell's little pigs. (But I can't believe that in this respect things were too different in the camp of the Democrats.)

As Director of Scheduling, I had responsibility for coordinating the political activities of over thirty so-called surrogates for the President: Cabinet officers, Senators, Congressmen, and senior administration officials who would be out speaking in behalf of the President during the campaign. Also, I was given the task of organizing all the celebrities and athletes for the campaign, a rather delicate assignment considering the egos of politicians and show-business personalities. Finally, I was given the Committee's petty-cash safe and the job of paying out moneys to individuals. I'll never know why I was asked to do this, but I think this is what caused all of my troubles.

THOUGH IT WAS KNOWN that Attorney General John Mitchell would resign to become head of the Committee, for several months the acting director was Jeb Magruder, my immediate superior. We became close friends. Although I had no reason to mistrust most of the men with whom I worked, I probably trusted Jeb most of all. Our wives and children were fond of each other; we shared many of the same friends outside political circles. We went on trips together. There was absolutely nothing in our relationship to alert me to what was to happen later on.

A number of us were breakfasting in Beverly Hills prior

to a campaign party for celebrity backers of the President when word came from Washington of the break-in at the Democratic headquarters at the Watergate. There was great excitement, much telephoning, and what seemed to me at the time complete consternation on the part of all our people. No one seemed to know why or how it could have happened.

Days later, Gordon Liddy was arrested and charged with masterminding the bugging project. As everyone knows, he remained silent, refusing to testify. It is interesting to speculate about what would have happened had he told his story. One thing is certain: I would not be writing this article.

I did not dislike Gordon Liddy, an inscrutable figure with a mysterious cloak-and-dagger past, though he seemed out of place on either the Finance Committee or ours. He came on strong and made no secret of being contemptuous of weakness in others. He seemed to say, "Don't tread on me!" I had never known anyone like him.

When Magruder assured me that Liddy was solely responsible for the Watergate fiasco, that no one higher up had authorized such foolhardy and illegal activities, I could believe it. I could not see John Mitchell approving anything of the sort, and I certainly did not suspect Jeb. It was to be ten months later before I learned the truth—or, rather, before Jeb admitted his own participation. The truth I will never know.

Two weeks after the June 17 break-in came "the sting," but I didn't feel it too much at the time. Magruder was a master seducer. He appealed to my friendship, then to my loyalty. He lambasted Liddy's stupid Watergate break-in. Then he told me that huge sums of money had been given to Liddy for "dirty tricks," which I had thought of as pranks but which in the aftermath of Watergate had taken on a more sinister meaning. Now, if the FBI or anyone else came nosing around, would I corroborate the statement that the money had been given to Liddy for intelligence-gathering rather than dirty tricks? Watergate had jeopardized the campaign enough, and we couldn't stand any more bad publicity. Call it what you might—"an embellishment of the truth," "a little white lie," or "a substitution of one perfectly legal activity for another legal activity"—I did not like any part of it. But because I had not been involved in Watergate and because I believed Jeb's story that the buck stopped with Liddy, the possibility of my being interviewed by the FBI seemed remote indeed.

I was too busy scheduling the surrogates and other speakers during that period to worry too much about what

I might be facing. I had not promised that I would comply with the request, but I had left the impression that I would if it became necessary.

Then one day in July it happened. The FBI came. I was interviewed. I was asked questions about the purpose of money that had passed through my hands from Hugh Sloan (treasurer of the Finance Committee) to Gordon Liddy. My answer: for intelligence-gathering.

Now that I had "done it for the President," it did not enter my mind that I might have to do it again—and again. (Talk about an innocent!) Quite suddenly in August I was asked to testify before the Watergate grand jury. It came as a complete surprise. Me? Before the grand jury? Why? I knew nothing about Watergate. Jeb said, "Tell the same story." Having been given to believe that Liddy, unauthorized, had used his dirty-trick funds for *l'affaire* Watergate, I could see why it sounded better to call them intelligence funds. But if I felt that testifying falsely before a grand jury was going pretty far just to change the name of a few never-to-be-performed campaign pranks, I felt powerless to do otherwise. I was trapped. If I changed my answer, what would I be doing to Jeb, John Mitchell, Bob Haldeman, and others who I was told were depending on me? I would lie awake at night imagining my getting through the ordeal without having to repeat that absurd story. I did not know that I was being used to cover up the truth about Watergate.

The fall was hectic as we wound up the campaign. Then, with the election over and a good job done, I thought, Magruder and I turned our attentions to the inauguration. He was the executive director and I his deputy.

IT WAS IN JANUARY, just before the inauguration, that I discovered I was to be called as a witness in the trial of the Watergate Seven. There was no longer the reason of saving the election, and I was beside myself with apprehension. Earlier my concern had been that I was being forced to do something that I knew to be wrong for a cause that I felt was right. Now it was different. Even though the lie was inconsequential and seemingly irrelevant to the trial at hand, it grew in proportion to the number of times it had to be repeated. And the only reason for repeating it now was that it had been told before. I could not change my story without betraying those whom I thought to be my friends. For the first time I felt the terror of unnamed dangers to myself and to my family.

After the trial, I felt depressed. I did not feel that I had

injured any of the defendants in the case because I was certain that my infinitesimal piece of false testimony was immaterial. But I felt somehow debased and uneasy. Something was wrong, but I didn't know what it was. I was losing my zest for life in Washington. When I made the decision to go back into the business world I felt better, making the private vow never, never to allow myself to become involved in so dreary a project again, no matter how lofty the purpose.

During the month of March, media charges against the White House and the Committee had grown wilder. Though I tended to discount most of what I read because so much that was written about me was untrue, it was obvious that there were things wrong that I knew nothing about. A pressure began to build inside me to get out the truth as I knew it—to at least get the record straight as far as Porter was concerned. But my path to the prosecutors was to be strewn with obstacles—two Committee lawyers who I am sure did not mean to harm me, and, later, Jeb Magruder's lawyer, James Sharp, who double-crossed me. Jeb himself, I believe, tried to help, but his timing was poor.

Final discovery of how I had really been used came on April 14, 1973. Jeb Magruder's world had collapsed when he admitted in a face-to-face encounter that he had been lying to me steadily since the break-in on June 17, 1972.

From then on I could think of nothing but getting rid of my burden of over nine months. There were times when I felt so alone, so isolated—as though I were the only culprit. I had cut myself off from the others. But I was committed to total disclosure and had small thought of the consequences. I did not ask for immunity at the Senate hearings, nor would I allow my lawyer to ask for it. Charlie Murray is a fine lawyer and did his best to protect the rights that I kept insisting on throwing away. But I had no stomach for taking advantage of legal technicalities. I wanted to tell all, such as it was, and I did. I must admit that at that time I still had great faith in our judicial system. Today I'm not so sure.

Though I was anxious to get to the hearings to clear the air, to dispel all press conjecture by telling what really happened, my two days there were much more harrowing than anything I had expected. It will be remembered by some that at the Senate hearings, Senator Baker put the screws to me by asking certain questions that have been the subject of argument among moral philosophers and theologians for centuries. Unfortunately, I was an early witness and received treatment a bit rougher than some of the later and more culpable witnesses. I realize now that the Senator was new to national exposure on television and couldn't resist the temptation to show off a bit. I think he was sorry later. I have forgiven him, but I must admit that for months afterward I had many a daydream wherein I sat at the Senator's table and *he* sat perspiring in the witness chair with the hot lights shining in his face so that he

"For de little stealin' dey gits you in jail soon or late. For de big stealin' dey makes you emperor and puts you in de Hall o' Fame when you croaks."

—Eugene O'Neill

The Emperor Jones, 1920

"Whenever a man has cast a longing eye on offices, a rottenness begins in his conduct."

—Thomas Jefferson, 1799

"Curse on his virtues! they've undone his country."

—Joseph Addison

Cato, 1713

could not see his questioner. (Some of the questions I thought up for him were dillies!) At any rate, one of the easier questions he asked me was, "What caused you to abdicate your own conscience?"

My answer was, briefly, loyalty to the President, a man who I had met for the first time when I was eight years old. "I felt that I had known this man all my life—not personally, perhaps, but in spirit. I felt a deep sense of loyalty to him."

THERE WERE THOSE WHO FELT that for one who had sat on the ducking stool, and been tarred and feathered in addition, I had suffered enough. But the inquisitors thought otherwise. For ten months I was left hanging there, twisting in the wind. (It's called the Ehrlichman treatment.) Because I had no knowledge of anything they needed to convict another defendant (Magruder had long since made his deal), they were not about to let me off the hook. I have thanked God many times that I knew nothing. I would hate to gain my freedom by fingering someone else.

After I had entered my guilty plea, I really had faith that I would be given some sort of suspended sentence or, better yet, just probation. Because I had been suborned, and because my involvement was so peripheral, the prosecutors had promised to show me in the best light possible.

Be that as it may, I did try to prepare myself for the possibility of a prison term just in case the sky fell. I started with trying to visualize the maximum of five years that all commentators—press and TV—used for dramatic effect. (Some of the bloodthirsty old jackals sounded as though they would have loved that.) I worked my way down to maybe three months, hoping for probation. I was never prepared for "thirty days." As one of my inmate acquaintances at Lompoc said, "Thirty days? Why, I've stood in the chow line longer than that!" Well, Ehrlichman called me a little fish, and Magruder's lawyer called me an ant, so I suppose the judge figured that little fishes and little bugs should be taught a lesson with little sentences.

Now that I've been there I wouldn't give anything for my experience at the minimum-security camp at Lompoc. The camp was physically attractive, with green lawns and flowers outside. Inside it had the appearance of a BOQ. There were no fences, no bars. Everything was wide open.

I am glad to have had the privilege of spending three-and-a-half weeks with people I would never have known otherwise. It's often said that if more men from the upper classes had to spend time in jails and prisons, conditions would be improved, and fast. If this is true, then the Republican party should become the party of *reform*.

One word more. I have taken a few pokes at the press that I just couldn't resist. My good friends will know that I'm not talking about them. Vic Gold gets five stars for seeming to have understood my predicament sooner than others did. But there are writers of a more "liberal" persuasion who also have shown an understanding of what I've been through. I can only hope that this is not just normal fallout from a no-holds-barred attack on Richard Nixon as was the case in TRB's column. To all of you I say, "It's been tough, but not tragic." □

Herbert L. Porter is now in the construction business with his father-in-law in California.