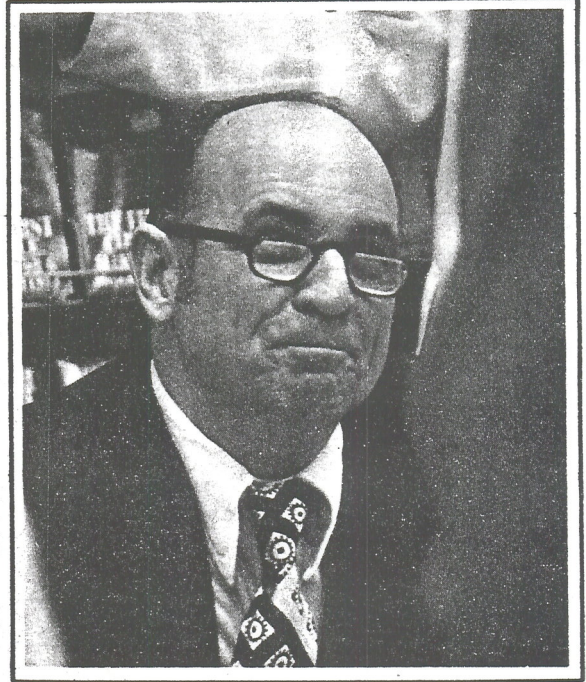


People

Gentleman Jim McCord

By Susan Berman



■ A month or so ago *The FBI Story* was rerun on television. I always watch the reruns because they make me feel secure. International conflicts, inflation, bad weather and personal torments vanish as I watch fearless G-Man Jimmy Stewart and his long-suffering wife, Vera Miles, wind up okay (minus one son killed in action) one more time.

Why does he risk life, limb and love for his country? Dedication, faith, and a belief in the "American Way of Life." The one that needs protecting.

And now, in real life (or is life merely imitating art?), comes James McCord. Same humility, same light drawl, same all-American pie.

He is here today at B. Dalton's on Kearny to sell his book, *A Piece of Tape, The Watergate Story, Fact and Fiction*. It is published by "Washington Media Services Ltd. at the Maryland National Center in Rockville, Maryland." That's him. Although he was offered heavy bread by big gun publishers, he preferred to do it himself. ("I want this to be a textbook for students who really want to know about Watergate. Publishers said, 'You can make a million dollars if you write it in two months,' but I wasn't interested. I just want to tell the truth.")

McCord enters the bookstore at 11:37 a.m. It is late August and he has been on the road selling his book for the last two months: New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, shopping centers, book stores, television shows, radio shows, newspaper interviews. Wherever people might want to read his story or talk to him. He feels he has been wronged and is quietly obsessed with telling the truth.

It seems like ancient history now, but it was the summer of 1973 when daytime television introduced us to a whole new cast of characters. Living rooms were dominated by a drama called the Senate Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities, or, as we affectionately called it, Watergate. The real flash was the first thirty-seven

days of hearings from May 17 to August 7, before the recess.

There were Good Guys. The White Hats were the men on that Committee — people like the Beverly Hillbilly Sam Ervin and Mr. Cool, Howard Baker.

The Black Hats were those involved in Watergate and its coverup — young opportunistic John Dean, nefarious looking John Ehrlichman, Maurice Stans, John Mitchell and the rest. The Black Hats were less than credible by virtue of their associations: they seemed tangled too tight in the political web that created Watergate.

But one man was different. He wasn't much to look at, certainly never a candidate for a *Cosmo* centerfold. He wasn't a showman and he didn't have much style. He looked and acted like an accountant, dry, precise and with a monotonous voice. This was a man who changed hats in the middle of Watergate by writing a letter. He was told if he wrote that letter "the government might fall."

His book jacket says, "James McCord is the man who broke Watergate . . . into it and wide open." McCord was hired as security chief for the Committee for the Re-Election of the President in 1971 and was arrested at the Watergate June 17, 1972. He was convicted January 10, 1973 on eight counts of conspiracy, burglary, bugging and wiretapping and three months later wrote the letter that broke the case open.

The letter to Judge John Sirica which broke the conspiracy of silence about Watergate stated that political pressure was put on the seven defendants to plead guilty, that the Nixon administration officials had prior knowledge of the bugging and that perjury was committed at the trial.

His subsequent testimony before the Senate Watergate Committee and the special grand jury was largely hearsay, but it was enough to start the reams of disclosures about the guilty White House officials.

He was sentenced to one to five years and is now out on appeal. In the nearly two

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years since he was sentenced, he has been writing, lecturing and traveling.

McCord walks in now, the former FBI-CIA agent. But he looks strangely vulnerable. His pants are baggy and he's wearing the same suit and tie that he wore on television.

He has a Nixon five o'clock shadow and says he didn't have time to shave on the plane from Oklahoma, so he takes out a can of Rapid Shave and heads for the bathroom.

There has been no advance publicity except for a column item. Yet his public is here. The bookstore received over 200 calls that morning. When was James McCord, the hero of Watergate, coming?

He comes out now, at exactly noon as promised, and he has the sort of face that always looks tired.

His books are stacked before him and he extends his hand to the first buyer.

"Did you watch the hearings? Can I answer any questions for you?" he asks.

"Yes, I watched them. Thank you so much for what you did, Mr. McCord. Could you sign this book to my husband? He's a law student."

He smiles, looks a little embarrassed and signs "To Rick, With Best Wishes, James McCord." Then he dates it and looks down at the B. Dalton felt-tip pen as if it might feel unfamiliar after years of service with government ballpoints. One woman buys five copies, for her political science professors. People come in, stare, say, "Isn't that James McCord?", rush to the table and buy a book. One woman gushes thank you, and presses a note into his hands.

A couple with Oakland A's caps come up to him.

"We sure do appreciate what you did, Mr. McCord. Could you sign this book to my wife?"

McCord again smiles an embarrassed smile and does his best wishes number. Buyer after buyer gets that autograph. All have questions, some about an aspect of testimony, some about his legal costs and all about Nixon — did he suspect?

McCord is cordial to the idea of a lunch interview but suggests we talk during the autographing, too, to save time. Television and radio crews come and go, all with two questions: Why did he break into the Watergate? Did Nixon know?

To the first question he has an entirely credible answer. Like Jimmy Stewart, he really thought he was doing it for his country.

"There had been violence in the 1968 Chicago convention and we were told that our mission was to prevent a recurrence of that. I thought it was authorized by the highest officials of government," he said.

To the second question he directs his answer to what he thinks should happen to Nixon.

"I think he should go through the same procedure that any other citizen would. I think an investigation should be made and if the evidence is sufficient, it should go to trial. If not, then it should be dropped."

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(This interview took place before President Ford gave Nixon a full pardon for any federal crimes.)

Many ask him how long it took him to write the book and he replies, "A year. I had a lot to research and it took me a long time just to do the actual writing. But I wanted to make sure everything was just right, that was important. Just like I was very careful of my facts when I testified. I knew everything had to be precise to be credible."

A few people thumb through his book and don't buy one. He smiles and invites questions. It's almost painful to watch an essentially private person with no schmaltz push himself into a public spotlight. He is especially interested in the law students, telling them that he is asking for an acquittal or a new trial. He says the five weeks he spent in the old District of Columbia jail after his conviction were difficult but has no doubt he could "survive" another jail term if he had to.

A young woman wearing a conservative blue wool suit and a Mary Quant face rushes up to him.

"Do I look familiar, Jim?" she asks as she gives him a quick peck on the cheek. Previously she had besieged bookstore manager George Carroll to let her talk to McCord. They had worked on the Committee to Re-Elect the President together.

"I'm so proud of you, Jim. I just hope things go well for you," she says after they finish discussing who was where now.

When asked if he feels bitterness toward Nixon and All the President's Men, McCord says softly, "No. Justice is being done now and it will be done in the end. I'm not bitter and I don't bear any grudges."

When I ask him if all that government service was worth it now, he answers in the affirmative.

"It was a very satisfying life. The time in the FBI was very challenging. I went in right out of high school and then again after college. And I joined up with the CIA when it first started out. It was very exciting. We had the chance to do intelligence work all over the world. I joined the FBI after Pearl Harbor. It was apparent that we needed some sort of protection. Those days were very interesting. If J. Edgar Hoover were around today and the FBI had been called in, he would have broken the Watergate case wide open."

James McCord, Jr. is quite a middle

American guy. His people came to this country from Scotland and Ireland in the early 1700s and he comes from a long line of lawyers, teachers and ministers.

He spent his childhood in Texas where his father, James McCord, Sr., was a lawyer who became a school teacher. He graduated from the University of Texas and joined the FBI in 1942. His twenty-five years in the intelligence services of this nation began with work in radio intelligence against the German and Soviet Intelligence Services which were then targeting their efforts against South America and the United States. After commissioned flight duties in World War II, he returned to the FBI as a Special Agent in San Diego and San Francisco.

He joined the Central Intelligence Agency in 1951 and from 1962 to 1964 he was the CIA's Senior Security Officer in Europe. He attended the Air War College and returned to the CIA as chief of its Technical Security Division and later chief of its Physical Security Division. He retired from the CIA in 1970, having earned its Certificate of Merit (1966) and Distinguished Service Award (1970).

In 1971 he lectured on the criminal justice system at Montgomery College and in September, 1971 he joined the Committee to Re-Elect the President as its security director.

There is a lull in book sales for a moment and I ask McCord why he supported Nixon in the first place.

"I've traveled a lot and this is the best system in the world. Even what has come out of Watergate has restored our faith in the government. I thought Nixon stood for all those things but I'd voted for both Democrats and Republicans in the past . . ."

Finally it is 3 p.m. For three hours he has been signing and signing and smiling and saying he hopes he doesn't have to go to jail but that whatever turns out to be justice will be justice. He agrees to go to lunch before KTVU shows up at 4 p.m.

At Sam's Grill down the street, store manager George Carroll and assistant manager Jim Kirkland have martinis. McCord has a piece of French bread, no drinks.

He says he misses the beauty and weather of San Francisco and liked living here. He thanks Carroll for planning his visit and says he's pleased with how the book is doing.

"It's met with a good reception and I'm writing a second called 'The White House Connection' and then a third, 'The Criminal Justice System: Myth and Reality,'" he says.

He describes himself as basically an ordinary family man. His wife of twenty-five years works as a receptionist in a school, his son Mike, twenty-two, is a

graduate of the Air Force Academy; his daughter Carol Anne, twenty, is a college student and he has a younger daughter, Nancy, eighteen, who is mildly retarded. McCord drives her to her special education classes every day when he is home. He is a Presbyterian. The McCords are a churchgoing family and have been their entire lives.

He stonewalls suggestions about how much he will make off his \$3.95 book by saying, "It's just inappropriate for me to talk about that now. But I have upwards of \$60,000 in legal fees to pay off and that is what the book is for."

He eats his Shrimp Louie slowly, commenting on how much plane food he's gulped down in the last two months. Between bites, I ask a few direct questions:

What was the final straw that made you write that letter?

It was when they tried to involve the CIA. When they wanted me to blame it on the CIA and put forth a phony defense. I felt the people had a right to know.

Did you write the letter to save your own skin?

No, not really. I just wanted to tell the truth.

Which of the members of the Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activi-

ties was the best investigator?

Daniel Inouye. He has a razor sharp mind and was interested in getting the whole truth.

Did you ever meet former President Nixon?

No.

Do you think Watergate spells the end for political sabotage?

Well, for a good long time at least. I'd say no one would try this again for at least forty years.

Do you think we will need more or less security and surveillance in the future?

Oh, I definitely think less.

Do you see yourself as a heroic figure?

No, I don't. I wrote that letter to let the people know.

What are your plans for the future?

Well, I'll be working on my defense and, since I'm a small book publisher now, we're thinking of publishing some monographs on the bicentennial in 1976. That will be a great holiday for the country.

With that, James McCord finished his coffee and walked me back to the bookstore, being careful to stay on the outside. □