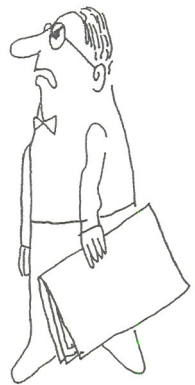


Nixon and Watergate Are Gone.

Now Do People Love Us?

No.

By Richard S. Salant



I HATE to be a spoilsport. But no matter how passionately we may want to put Watergate behind us, I am afraid the nation ought to keep the books open for awhile longer. There is, I think, still a valid question or two about whether the system really worked all that well.

Unquestionably, it did — absolutely magnificently — for the final phase of Watergate which involved the actual transition of power. In what other nation in the world could there have been such a wrenching,

non-elective change at the top, achieved so peaceably, so calmly, with such quiet and unity? It was a tribute to the strength of our basic institutions.

But can we be as satisfied with the system in the months which preceded Aug. 8? Was Watergate, in its broadest sense, just a wild aberration which we can be confident can never recur?

Let's look at it in two ways: Once on the assumption that an injustice was done to the President and that he was without serious

fault; and second — the opposite — that there *were* significant flaws in the President and his administration and that by one means or another a change *was* in the best interests of this nation. Either way, an observer might reasonably wonder whether the system was all that perfect, and whether we need worry about any possibility of future shock.

If we make the first assumption — that the President and his administration were not significantly flawed and that his resignation was

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unjustly and unfairly coerced — it seems pretty clear that the system worked horrendously. Because on that assumption, it is inescapable that there was a fundamental failure — and impropriety — of some of this nation's basic institutions: Our legislative system, as represented by the Ervin Committee and the unanimous House Judiciary Committee, was dead wrong; our judicial system, as represented by Judge John Sirica on up to a unanimous Supreme Court, was dead wrong; our press, or most of it, was dead wrong; and the seat of ultimate power — the American people — a majority of whom (the polls showed) opted for a change, were dead wrong.

And so it seems beyond argument that if Rabbi Korff and Hamilton Fish Sr. and tens of millions of Nixon loyalists are right, an injustice of colossal proportions has been done and the system can hardly be said to have worked.

Now let's see whether we can be all that surely satisfied with the pre-transition system on the second assumption — that Richard Nixon's conduct in office, his acts of omission or commission, or his personality, or whatever, were so seriously flawed that his departure was in the public interest. Assuming all that, was it really the system which rescued the nation?

A reasonable observer might well conclude that the answer to that question is mixed, indeed: On the one hand, the judiciary, the Congress, the press and the public played vital roles in uncovering, or publicizing Watergate and causing the peaceful transition. But would any of these major institutions ever have begun to operate at all were it not for a series of extraordinary accidents?

Item: Was it the system which could claim credit for Frank Wills' having noticed the tape, on June 17, 1972, which held open the door to steps which led to the Democratic national headquarters?

Item: Was it the system that brought the break-in case before a rather obscure law-and-order judge named Sirica — even among the law profession, not exactly a household name — who was best known for his heavy sentences and the fact that he was once a boxer and a friend of Jack Dempsey?

Item: Was it the system which led a lower echelon Republican staff lawyer of the Senate Watergate Committee to ask Alexander Butterfield — out of left field, as far as we all know — a question which led to Butterfield's disclosure of the recording system which Nixon had established in the White House?

Item: Was it the system, or some inexplicable quirk of human behavior, which led Nixon to set up the recording system in the White House — and then to do the even more extraordinary thing of apparently forgetting and conducting the kind of discussions he did in the White House as though there were no such recording system — or that it would never be discovered?

If we assume that Nixon's departure from office was in the public interest, then can the system really take credit? Or would it be more accurate to say that the system worked only if inherent in the system are entirely unsystematic accidents?

We can't be too confident the system is so fail-safe that our nation will not again have to go through a trauma like Watergate.

“ . . . The problems he [Nixon] thrust upon himself and his nation brought to light a rather glaring, but as yet little noticed, flaw in our system. . . . Very little reportage has addressed itself toward making known the true character of those aspiring to be our leaders. . . . ”

—Ira R. Manson
Publisher
Human Behavior

All citizens ought to have a hard look at this chapter in American history, because it gives rise to fundamental questions which go to the heart of our system of government — questions concerning how we choose our leaders; questions concerning the relationships between governors and governed; questions concerning what the whole electoral process is and should be. And these questions call for scrutiny of the delicate and perplexing issues of political campaigns and campaign financing; of the nominating process; of the proper relationship and balance between the legislative and executive branches of the government; of the hierarchical organization of the office of the presidency, and the obligations and powers of the non-elected White House personnel and their proper relationship to the people and the rest of government.

Paths to Avoid

The first and most obvious lesson we in journalism must learn from Watergate is that whatever the hardly unanimous acclaim for the contribution of the press in this matter, we are fools if we either gloat or sprain our arms patting ourselves on the back.

Gloating is out of order if only because Watergate was a national tragedy. There could be no joy in it for any responsible member of the press. The press did what it thought it had to do.

Nor did what happened give us any right to be complacent, no right to avoid or reject review — both by ourselves and by outsiders. And we are equally fools if what happened turns us into a wolf pack or a lynching mob with a hunting license to shoot down whatever crosses our paths. Care, accuracy and objectivity remain the keystones of responsibility in news reporting.

Our performance in Watergate should serve as a beginning for ex-

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amination, not as a sign-off of self-praise. Alan Otten said it well in the Aug. 29 *Wall Street Journal*: “Once again the press is on a jag of self-satisfaction and self-congratulation.”

And he went on to urge that this was no time for that because we *are* fallible and the chorus of praise is more our own chorus than it is the harmonious choir of all the people out there. And he wrote of the efforts that “must be built on and expanded by the press to improve itself.” For, he said, “the worst possible thing would be if [these efforts] were reduced or abandoned now in the belief that the press’s role in Watergate has made everyone out there love us. They don’t.”

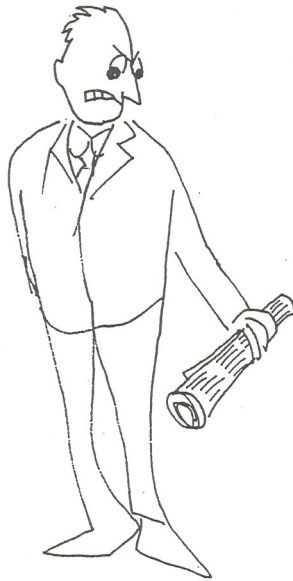
We should, then, welcome continued professional, sober, objective review of what we did in respect to the Watergate story — and how we did it. For this reason, I regretted that the Nixon administration, by refusing to supply back-up specifics to the National News Council, aborted the council’s attempted study of Nixon’s press conference charge that network news coverage of his administration was unprecedentedly “vicious” and “distorted.”

Not only should there be outside professional studies; we ourselves should examine ourselves. How well did we really do? How responsible were we? Are we sure that we would have brought the same persistence, the same devotion to digging into all the corners, to any president, no matter what his political party, no matter how good or bad the relations between him and the press? I am sure that we would have, but I know that there are those who are not so sure. This is the kind of question we must always ask ourselves — just to be sure; and it is a question which others have a right to ask — just to be sure.

And we must re-examine some of our basic approaches, and not take them for granted just because that’s the way the press has always

done it. Critics have raised questions about the use of unidentified sources, and the dangers of their using us. I happen to think that, in general, there was no serious abuse in this area; but the dangers are there, and the practices are worth re-examining. We just may find better ways to use source material, and with greater assurance of journalistic safety.

There is much to examine, and re-examine, in our own performance — not to point fingers at ourselves, or others, but to do even better next time.



Delusions of Love

Anyone in journalism who thinks Watergate has vindicated us and so everybody out there just loves us deludes himself. Tass isn’t the only one charging the American press with blame for President Nixon’s difficulties and his resignation. In the couple of weeks following Aug. 9, we received hundreds of letters, not with the hammer and sickle, but with the American flag, on their envelope flaps. And they vehemently blamed CBS News for the Nixon tragedy. Example (considerably edited): “Are you [profane adjective deleted] [obscene present participle deleted] [geneological charac-

terization deleted] happy?” Second example, just as perfectly clear, but in less need of deletion: “Our country would be better served if CBS would resign.”

Such reaction tells us we cannot be smug and that the press has a very long way to go before the public understands what our functions and responsibilities are in a democracy and what the First Amendment is all about.

I was appalled by the letters I received after we showed, on television, the action of the Russians when they pulled the plug on each of the three networks’ reporters who, during President Nixon’s visit to Moscow, sought to report on the Russian dissidents. One has to wonder how firmly based the First Amendment really is in the American mind when one gets dozens of letters saying, “Five bravos and three cheers to the Russian network for pulling the plug on smart aleck reporters from the United States. We, the people of the United States, only wish we could do the same here.” Or even more succinctly, “I’m glad the Soviets pulled the plug on news media [barnyard obscenity deleted] stirrers. If authorities would do the same in this country we would all be better off.”

We would be wrong to dismiss as ignoramuses all these people who feel so strongly against us. Except for a hard core of the uneducable, those who are ignoramuses about us are ignoramuses because we, among others, have not educated them as to what the press is all about.

Too many of them believe that the press has an obligation to be on “the team.” But, in fact, we can be on the team only of truth, or as near as we fallible journalists can come to the truth. Too many of our critics believe that there is something sinister and improper about what almost all observers of the American press since the beginning have accepted as a proper role of adver-

sary and watchdog.

We must, to fulfill the role that the founding fathers saw for us when they adopted the First Amendment, be skeptical of our governors without being cynical, probing and tough without being bullying and brutal. After all, the government and the press do have contrasting roles — theirs to make themselves look as good as possible, ours to come as close to the accurate picture as we can; theirs sometimes to conceal and obfuscate, ours always to reveal and clarify.

Journalists almost unanimously have accepted this and, indeed, take it for granted. But many members of the public question it. There must be a re-examination and re-education by us and by the public of the proper role of the press in these matters.

Whatever might have been done by the press or tolerated by the public with Watergate, broadcast journalism — the branch of the press that was *most* manipulated — was forbidden by law to do it.

We, in broadcasting, who for all practical purposes are obliged to permit the paid, controlled campaign appearances which so often concentrate on image rather than on substance, would seem to have a very special obligation to offset that with broadcasts in which we can bring our own independent journalistic searchlight to bear. That can be done only through a variety of types of broadcast presentations which supplement the relatively short hard news pieces — types of special broadcasts which at least have the promise of better revealing the nature of our candidates.

Such special broadcasts include debates — particularly the Oxford types of debates; in-depth interviews by broadcast and print journalists; meaningful full-length documentaries; and a variety of other formats and techniques which are not within the control of the candidate and in which there is at least a chance that some part of the real man will emerge.

Yet the law — the law under the Constitution whose First Amendment says that the Congress shall enact *no* law abridging the freedom

of the press — says no, we cannot present any of these special broadcasts which just might contribute so much to informing the public. The law is Section 315 [equal time ruling] of the Communications Act. The multiplicity of splinter party presidential candidates simply results in Section 315's precluding our even making a start on the kinds of special broadcasts which might have helped, at least a little, in avoiding, or ameliorating, Watergate.

I don't argue that if there had been no Section 315, there would have been no Watergate. But we in electronic journalism might have done a somewhat better job in informing the voter had Section 315 not stood in the way.

Escaping the Trap

Both the 1944 election of Franklin Roosevelt and Watergate suggest there is an even more fundamental question of journalistic performance which all of us would do well to examine — and that the press failed, for whatever reason, at a critical point both in 1944 and 1972.

First 1944: Jim Bishop's new book "FDR's Last Year" persuasively indicates that Roosevelt's physician, and others in the White House, knew in the spring of 1944 — before the Democratic convention or the election — that Roosevelt was fatally ill. And the voters never knew it, because the press — quite possibly because *it* didn't know it either — never reported it.

In different, but no less grave, circumstances, Watergate involved an equally crucial gap. If we assume that something went wrong with the last administration, one can fairly ask whether the press, print and electronic, must not have failed somewhere along the pre-Aug. 8, 1974, way. For it would seem reasonable to conclude that the Richard Nixon who, in 1972, got more votes than, and the largest plurality of, any candidate for the presidency in history was not the Richard Nixon of the Senate and House committee hearings and reports and the transcripts of the tapes.

If that is so, it raises an exceed-

ingly difficult and important question as to *why* this crucial gap. After all, the fundamental function of the American press is accurately to inform — to fulfill the public's right to know. And at no time, in a democracy, is that function more important than during the presidential campaign period, when Americans are getting ready to make their most important political decision — their vote for a candidate for the presidency, the most important office in the world. The press's paramount responsibility is to inform the voter of what manner of man the candidate is — what he's really like — and what he stands for.

Yet, if Watergate is what it seems to be, and the testimony, the tapes and the trials in fact tell us what they seem to tell us, the American press fell woefully short of doing its basic job. For, on this reasonable assumption, it seems apparent that candidate and public figure Richard Nixon was not the real Richard Nixon. It was our job to cause them more nearly to coincide. We didn't do that job. As in 1944, so again in 1972, the press failed.

Of course, the nature of Nixon, and his fundamental strategies vis-a-vis the public and the press made it exceedingly difficult, if not impossible for the press to do its job. He was an obsessively private and remote man, and he and his chief aides successfully adopted the strategy of keeping to an absolute minimum the opportunity for the press to report, and of confining the press, and especially the electronic press, simply to transmitting.

During the crucial periods of election campaigns, he was particularly insulated and isolated; his appearances were totally controlled. And this presented a grave threat to our democratic processes — it turned our front page into advertising pages, and we were unable to find an effective way to escape the trap.

I don't know just what we could have done. But I do know that for whatever reason, it appears the American people voted for a man they didn't know and whom they only could have known more accurately through their press. ■