

Watergate and the System

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NOTES ON THE OLD SYSTEM. *To Transform American Politics.* By Marcus Raskin. 180 pages. McKay. \$6.95.

To a greater degree than even he anticipated, Richard M. Nixon provided the perfect squelch to the social unrest and radical ferment on the nineteen-sixties. For not only did his Administration reverse progressive trends that were apparent in the areas of civil rights, the war on poverty, and concern for the environment; it also gave us Watergate. And Watergate had the initial effect of shocking everybody out of his usual ideological occupations, and the secondary effect of suggesting that perhaps the "system" could work after all (because it appeared to "cure" Watergate by getting rid of its causes). In other words, the flood of Watergate obscured the leaks in the ship of state; and when the flood was pumped dry, the leaks appeared to be gone. At least they appeared to be gone until books like Marcus Raskin's "Notes on the Old System: To Transform American Politics" came along. Marcus Raskin was in Washington before Watergate (as a legislative adviser to a group of Congressmen and then as a member of President Kennedy's special staff of the National Security Council), and he is still in Washington now that Watergate is past (as co-director, with Richard J. Barnet, of the Institute for Policy Studies, which he and Mr. Barnet jointly founded). Mr. Raskin has never lost sight of the leaks. In fact, he believes that Watergate was just another weak spot in the ship of state's planking.



Marcus Raskin

Inevitable Historical Outgrowths

Mr. Raskin believes, to abandon the metaphor, that neither Richard Nixon nor Watergate was an aberration in the working of the American political system. On the contrary, both were inevitable historical outgrowths in the evolution of that system. Ever since Abraham Lincoln "developed the presumption that the power of the Presidency acting alone was sufficient to prosecute a total war in defense of the Union," the executive branch has been growing stronger and stronger, a growth that has accelerated since the Presidency of Theodore Roosevelt. And ever since Lincoln's assumption of power, the Congress has grown concomitantly weaker.

But however strong the Presidency had become by the mid-twentieth century, it still functioned as "the instrument of those groups, leaderships, and classes that guide the American destiny." By the sixties it

had become all too apparent that that destiny was conceived to be "imperial expansion," and the system began to protest against itself. What Mr. Nixon tried to do was to save the system by evolving it one step further and creating "his own organization, designed to circumvent . . . the groups, leadership, and classes" on which the President was traditionally dependent.

But for complicated reasons, he failed to anticipate a paradox: "The White House horrors, as John N. Mitchell called them exposed the American governing process for all to see. To forestall a political revolutionary consciousness, it was necessary to develop a theory that Mr. Nixon and his activities were distinguishable from the system's usual operations. In other words, Mr. Nixon had to be perceived by a majority in Congress and the media, as well as by the American audience, as a pathological occupant of the Presidency." In order for the system to remain intact, its most visible exemplar had to be removed. In short, the cancer was not growing on the Presidency; it had merely come to a head.

The Nub of the Argument

This is merely the nub of Mr. Raskin's argument—a theoretical analysis far too complex and subtle to be adequately summarized here. It is bound not to appeal to everyone. Liberals will find themselves skeptical of Mr. Raskin's Marxist analysis of the problem—his reasoning that "A President's cloak of legitimacy is woven from the fabric of responsibility for political stability and unity (United) and for imperial expansion (States)." Marxists in turn may have doubts about Mr. Raskin's essentially liberal solution—that the American people be brought into the system through the establishment of Congressional grand juries functioning on the community level (one jury to represent every 50,000 constituents). Others will be startled by Mr. Raskin's combination of Marxism and constitutionalism, and wonder whether one doesn't cancel out the other.

Still, "Notes on the Old System" is continually thought-provoking. Its analysis of Mr. Nixon's personality is fascinating ("He was plagued with a neurotic quality of suppressed Quakerism; he was hostile, paranoid, angry, and self-pitying. Yet, hidden behind clichés, he had a powerful and warped intellect and a formidable capacity to 'stay' when others wanted him 'out.'"), yet the analysis has the singular virtue of relating Mr. Nixon's personality to roots that go far back in history.

Most important of all, "Notes on the Old System" scratches an itch that no other commentary on Watergate has managed to do: it gives us something to think about instead of people to rage against; it offers a point of departure instead of another dead end; it points to where the ship is still leaking, and tries to plug it up. Read it: if you've forgotten where we were before Watergate came and drowned us, this will refresh your memory.