

The Thrill Is Gone

ESSAY

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, Jan. 29 — During World War II, Donald M. Nelson headed the War Production Board; the former Sears, Roebuck executive typified the businessman who came to Washington to put his managerial skills to work to win the war.

But one day, President Franklin Roosevelt grew suspicious of him; the next day, agents of the F.B.I. began a long, intimate "surveillance" of Donald Nelson, tapping his telephone at office and home, with relays of agents shadowing his every movement. The suspicion, it turned out, was unfounded, but J. Edgar Hoover had shown F.D.R. how closely a man who had annoyed a President could be watched on specious "national security" grounds.

Mr. Nelson never knew his every movement had been recorded, filmed, and noted down, his privacy and that of his family and friends irreparably invaded; he went to his grave convinced he had done his bit to help defeat the forces of totalitarianism, which employed secret police methods to unlawfully spy on citizens.

The story of the Nelson tap has never before been revealed but it is the kind of incident that might interest us more in days to come. For now that the Nixon men have been safely tucked away, the public may finally be permitted looks into the precedents to Watergate: These have been deliberately concealed for fear that the impressionable public might consider "everybody did it" to be some form of mitigation of guilt.

In a dog-in-the-manger essay on the day of the conviction of Mr. Nixon's aides, I wondered, "Who else is guilty?" Tired of the watertight cover-up of incidents in previous Administrations so clearly precedential to Mr. Nixon's unlawful use of the law, I ticked off a few incidents of likely abuse of the F.B.I. in the sixties and demanded to know why the truth was being suppressed.

How come, for example, former F.B.I. official Cartha DeLoach had not been called by the Senate Watergate Committee to testify to the F.B.I. surveillance of the 1968 Nixon campaign? We know the Government of Lyndon Johnson was too intently concerned with Nixon supporter Anna Chennault; we know that the telephone records of the Republican Vice-Presidential nominee were examined by the F.B.I. and reported to the Democratic President. Why were no questions asked by our protectors of civil liberty during the Watergate hearings?

In asking this, I was in error. "Deke" DeLoach, in a gracious note and subsequent conversation, tells me that he did testify about this and other matters before secret sessions of the Sen-

ate Watergate Committee, and before a Watergate grand jury as well.

That's interesting. It means that much of the story of Democratic abuses of our election process has been taken down in sworn testimony, sealed as unsuitable for public consumption during the get-Nixon era, and might be vouchsafed to us later when the powers that be are certain the vilification of the Nixon men is ineradicable.

The secret files of the Senate Watergate Committee were sent to the Senate Judiciary Committee; after first denying to this columnist that the files were in its hands, that committee staff checked with Senator James Eastland, who has decided that he will not release this embarrassing material until forced to do so by the Senate Rules Committee.

Meanwhile, most of the leaks now springing in the suppressed files are controlled by Fred Thompson, former minority counsel of the Watergate Committee, and now an attorney in Tennessee. Mr. Thompson was a bumbling, inept questioner; the transcripts are likely to reveal great gaps in the interrogation of witnesses. Understandably, Mr. Thompson wants the material to come out in a way that does not expose his patty-cake approach to the Democratic scandals.

New questions arise. Why has the testimony taken about the "dirty tricks" of L. B. J.'s Marvin Watson in the surveillance of newsmen been so successfully suppressed? Why have no investigative reporters been slipped the DeLoach testimony about 1968 from the usual Senate and special prosecutor's sources? Where is the zeal of yesteryear?

The thrill is gone because Mr. Nixon is gone. With heavy heart, The Washington Post trudges along after The New York Times on the C.I.A. probe, reminding us constantly of the danger of doing damage to institutions in all this investigating of past abuses.

The Senate select committee that must now investigate the misuse of the C.I.A. and F.B.I. in the Kennedy and Johnson years pledges no television spectaculars, no media manipulation by leak. Of course not; a wide understanding of the pervasiveness of illegal use of the law in past Administrations might somehow diminish the agreed truth that Richard Nixon invented the technique.

As terrible precedents unfold, Nixon-haters will assure us that the "cover-up" was far more serious than any of the abuses of power that so enraged the nation two years ago.

Of course, that is true. And doesn't it provide a creepy, manipulated sensation to discover that all this information, all this sworn testimony, has been marked "hold for release" for years by our intrepid investigators—deliberately kept from the public until well after Mr. Nixon had been struck down?