



The 'Friends'

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ONE OF THE Watergate burglars, James W. McCord, "sang" about the break-in, after which the President's counsel, John W. Dean III, "sang" on the executive level. George V. Higgins is accustomed to conspirators "singing" under interrogation. As a former Boston federal prosecutor with a tongue like the crack of a whip he takes a far more hardnosed view of the Watergate affair than others who have written about it. He looks at it like a cold, tough-talking prosecutor with no mercy for the guilty, the devious, the spineless.

So don't write off "The Friends of Richard Nixon" as just another Watergate book rehashing what others have already recounted. Higgins is also a novelist ("The Friends of Eddie Coyle"), and he treats the whole Watergate affair as a novelist might complete with plot, counterplot, cover-up, and crashing climax.

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THE FAMILIAR narrative unfolds with many an unfamiliar touch as Higgins forthrightly expresses his opinions of his cast and their their conduct. He holds no high opinion of Senate counsel Samuel Dash and thinks Senator Sam Ervin played to the gallery. As to the break-in at Democratic headquarters, he asserts flatly that it was a work of such "remarkable ineptitude" that any

prudent Mafia underboss could have foretold the outcome.

Where the President and his henchmen fatally erred, in Higgins' view, was in assuming that the American people would resolutely go on believing that their President could do no wrong. "President Nixon did not know what he was doing when he commenced to obstruct American justice. Neither did Haldeman, Ehrlichman or John Mitchell when they aspired to aid and abet him in that project."

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DEAN is a key figure in the Higgins cast because he believed he could handle the situation. "He couldn't handle it. He didn't know what the hell he was doing. He had been designated beekeeper, but he spent most of his time fighting the swarm." Unlike the Mob, who knew how to keep their men in line (the analogy is Higgins'), Dean didn't have the means. "The Mob, trading on fear to maintain discipline, calls it *respect*. Richard Nixon and his friends mistook for respect, repeatedly, what was merely the strategic obsequiousness of rather limited men."

These quotations give some idea of the biting Higgins approach to the Watergate affair — scornful in its listing of amateurs' errors, and pitiless in counting the cost to the participants and the country (Atlantic-Little Brown; \$10.95).