

A Pointless Incarceration

UNDER THE CONSTITUTION, as Gerald Ford well knows, the President has power to grant reprieves and pardons for offenses against the United States. This month the President will receive a petition for commutation in the case of E. Howard Hunt. In the name of mercy and justice, the petition should be granted.

Except for G. Gordon Liddy, who also merits relief but whose case is quite different, Hunt is the only Watergate defendant still in prison. No useful purpose whatever is being served by keeping him there.



We are concerned here with elementary questions of crime and punishment. Hunt's crime was conspiracy to commit burglary; his punishment is a prospective eight years in prison and a fine of \$10,000. Except for the brutal 20-year sentence imposed on Liddy, the punishment given Hunt is the most severe of them all.

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THE CRIME ITSELF, of course, was the breaking and entering of Democratic National Headquarters in the Watergate in June of 1972. Beyond question, Hunt was deeply involved in that sordid and stupid affair. He pleaded guilty. It is no defense to his crime, though it is a valid consideration in a plea for commutation, that he acted under the aegis of a former attorney general in what he supposed was the service of the then President of the United States.

The Watergate defendants ran up against "Hanging John" Sirica, as harsh a judge as ever sat on the federal bench. His thought was to terrify them by imposing sentences of a severity unheard of in simple breaking-and-entering cases. He hit them originally with sentences to shock the conscience and to extort their "cooperation." Compared with sentences imposed in other federal courts in other burglary trials, his sentences were outrageous.

Liddy has stonewalled from the beginning; his circumstances, to repeat, are different. Hunt, by contrast, has cooperated fully since his conviction. His prison record is exemplary.

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SURELY IT IS POINTLESS to incarcerate Howard Hunt; it is inconceivable that he would take up a burglar's career. He needs no "rehabilitation"; he is an accomplished writer, fully capable of supporting himself.

He has now spent almost two years in prison; as punishment for a political escapade, in which no one was hurt and nothing of value was stolen, this seems more than sufficient.

Simple compassion adds a final consideration. Hunt's wife died in an airplane crash in December, 1972. He has four children, ranging in age from 12 to 24. Because he has no living parents, brothers or sisters, or other close relatives, the children are wholly dependent upon him both emotionally and financially.

The eight-year sentence imposed on Hunt was an act of injustice. The President can correct it through an act of mercy now.