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A Possible Gauge of What's Sticking in America's Craw

By John D. Ehrlichman

SANTE FE, N. M.—Spiro Agnew is partly right and partly wrong. The news media are controlled, but not by the people he suspects.

Having just returned from an author's tour to 18 cities, I now know that the whole media thing—news-papers, radio news, television—is run by the world Styrofoam cartel. This secret group is imposing a dangerous uniformity on American journalism.

For example, there are rigid rules for the conduct of author interviews that seem to apply almost everywhere.

Rule one is that every touting author must be handed a Styrofoam cup within 30 seconds of his arrival at a studio or newsroom. Something hot and dark brown should be in it. Rule two is that every interviewer must ask the same questions. Rule three applies primarily to local television interviewers: Interviewers listen only to the questions, never the answers (some of them violate this rule, but not very many).

Yet there is hope, notwithstanding pervasive media domination by the Princes of Styrofoam, for even they cannot hope to impose their rules upon the indomitable callers who telephone the radio and television talk shows. And, where these real folks

are being heard, it may well be true that the questions are more important than the answers.

Discounting the occasional nut and the hosts who try to stack the deck, what is heard in the call-in questions may be the legendary and elusive voice of the people. As I traveled around, I concluded that the politicians would do well to listen to these callers in this year of platitudes, promises and piousness. Their telephoned questions may be some true gauge of what's in the voters' craw.

The recently reported congressional peccadillos have not escaped the notice of your average talk-show caller. They ask if that kind of thing has gone on in Washington in other times and parties, or is it something blighted only the current crop of middle-aged Democrats? Most callers strongly suspect that the Congressman is dogging it at their expense. It may be a bad year for the "ins" in Congress.

In all regions of the country I heard comments and questions about the Nixon pardon. There were good reasons for the pardon, I am sure, but no one out in the country seems to know what they were. Interestingly, the people are willing to listen on this subject and I sense that many can be persuaded that President Ford did the right thing. But, so far, the Republican Party has not sustained its burden of proof. I say the party

rather than the President or the White House because I strongly sense that they do other aspects of "the Washington problem."

Moreover, it is an issue any Republican candidate will face. Even Ronald Reagan will find it impossible to criticize or repudiate the pardon without risking alienating a substantial segment of his conservative base that still consists of diehard Nixon supporters.

There is also a pervading demand in the called-in questions that Richard Nixon and the rest of us tell the nation that we're sorry about what happened. They wonder why we haven't apologized. When told that some of us have, they ask why it hasn't been reported on their television sets. A Nixon memoir which includes expressed contrition should be a runaway best seller.

Many, many callers express a skepticism about what they have heard about or read in "The Final Days." The allegations about the Nixon's personal life clearly remain open questions in the minds of the majority I talked to. Yet, while they don't believe the Bernstein-Woodward version, they realize that, after his nearly 30 years in the public view, Richard Nixon

remains an enigma to them. People want to know what he's really like, in exquisite detail.

They are still worried about the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Central Intelligence Agency out there in the country. The Senate Oversight Committee has apparently not inspired much confidence that it can get the CIA in hand. One caller suggested that a senator who swears he can't keep track of his top assistant and his personal campaign contributions is a poor choice to try to keep an eye on what goes on behind the CIA.

CIA admissions of lawbreaking were a frequent subject of the calls I took. Countless callers wondered about the real reason for the White House taping system. Other unanswered Watergate questions still nag: Why did the burglars want to go into the Democrats' Watergate office anyway? No one seems to know. Was the C.I.A. involved? A lot of people seem to suspect so. Did the White House plan the break-in? If not, why did the "Watergaters" cover it up?

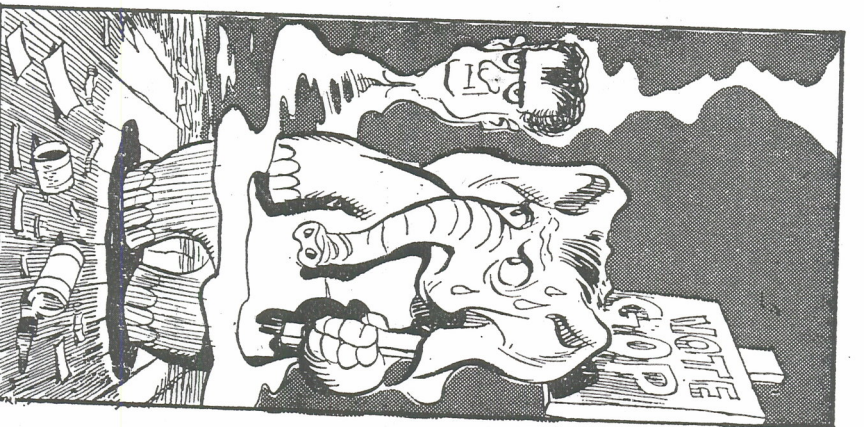
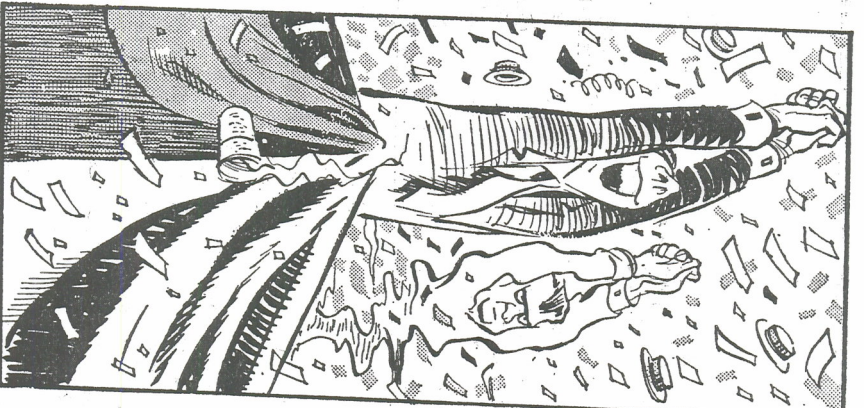
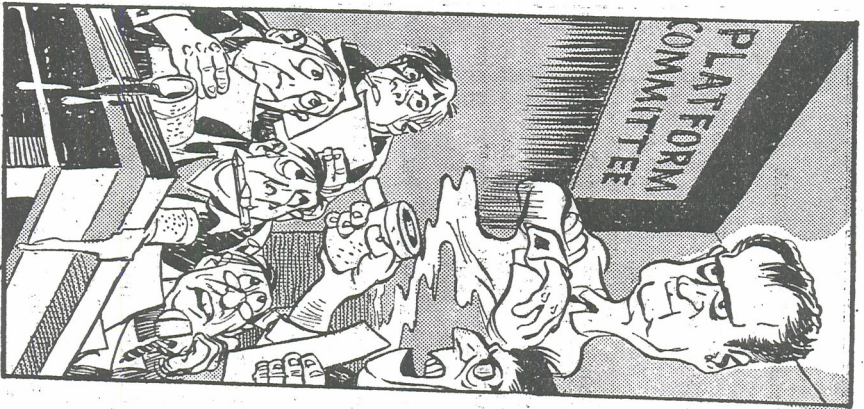
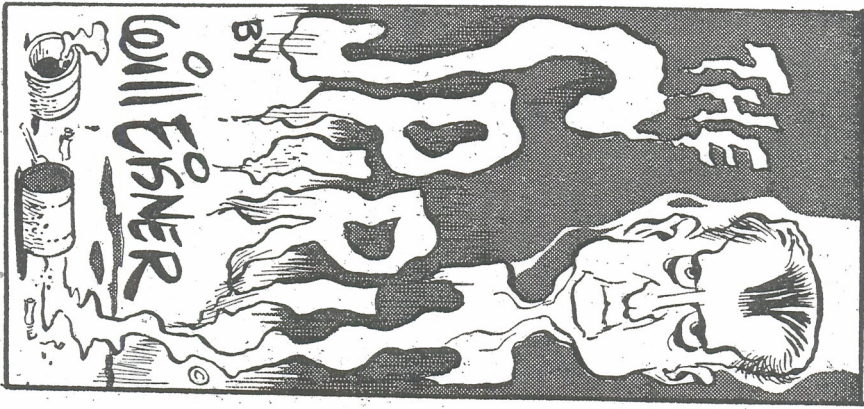
After this unscientific sampling, I have to say that Walter Mondale is probably right: Watergate and its aftermath are still very much in the minds of the voters and, so far, the Nixon pardon has tied President Ford to Watergate, however unfair and unfactual such a link may be.

The Republican National Convention is about to monopolize national television. The close contest for the nomination assures the Republicans a large viewing audience. Shouldn't they use the time to explain, clearly and conclusively, the President's good reasons for the Nixon pardon?

Some of my former colleagues used to argue: Talk only about our good issues, never the bad ones. Watergate is the opposition's issue, not "ours," so it should never be mentioned. I disagreed then and I still do.

The Nixon pardon bothers a great many Americans who, at the same time, are willing to listen. The Republicans can't duck the issue by pretending it doesn't exist, or by dumping the incumbent President. It's not a Ford problem, it's a Republican problem, if I heard those callers correctly. Republicans should use their unique opportunity to make the case for the pardon on all of that television time that will be theirs this month. If they don't, it may not matter much who they nominate.

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