

ESSAY

By William Safire

WASHINGTON—Many of the nation's book reviewers are purpling at the prospect of having to deal with "It Didn't Start With Watergate," a political consciousness-expanding book by Victor Lasky published this week by the Dial Press.

They cannot ignore it: This first carefully researched blast of criticism at the fusion of hypocrisy and hysteria that gripped this nation in 1973 and 1974 is both a literary and a political event.

Since most hardcover book buyers and sellers cheerfully admit to being confirmed Nixon-haters, the task of reviewers addressing a liberal audience is to savage Mr. Lasky's work in a way that does not stimulate readers to buy his book.

We can expect the Lasky book—IDSWW for short—to be attacked as not suitably dispassionate, a standard hardly set for the self-serving Watergate literature to date. Granted, it is partisan, argumentative, infused with righteous wrath—but it is careful. An extensive list of sources can be found in the back; historians will find it invaluable.

Next, many reviewers will affix the worst-selling label of all: *pro-Nixon*. And so it unabashedly is, from a man who believes that some wrongheaded actions should not have outweighed the strengths of our just-frosted leader.

Finally, the details of crimes and improprieties committed during the Johnson and Kennedy Administrations—generously, almost lovingly, set forth in this work—will be dismissed with a cavalier "everybody did it" is no excuse."

That's one of those undeniable statements. But if perspective is worth

gaining—and, after all, that's the work of history—then a look at Mr. Lasky's enumerations should convince all but diehards that the crimes, lies, and abuses of power of the period from 1961 to 1969 beat anything that happened before or since.

Those crimes have been dribbling out over the past three years. Amassed for the first time between two covers—from Kennedy Mafia-C.I.A. tie-ins to LBJ's illegal use of the F.B.I.—Mr. Lasky's compilation reveals a pattern of deceit and the easy toleration of power-abuse that will stun the most Watergate-jaded.

The theme that emerges might be called "Hypocrisy, Inc."—a secondary McCarthy Era, in which civil liberties were suspended in the name of civil liberty, and many of those who pointed the fingers of guilt were men with guilty hands.

There were six senators, each now said to be the recipient of illegal Gulf Oil contributions, piously charging impropriety in fundraising; there was the seventh, who engineered the cover-up of Bobby Baker for LBJ, charging cover-up; there was an impeachment counsel, secret author of the "Doar Plan" to spy on dissenters, inveighing against the "Huston Plan"; there was the crew that wiretapped Martin Luther King waxing indignant at wiretaps.

Now we know; but why, Mr. Lasky asks, were we not permitted to know during the witchhunt years? The in-

formation was there; where were the investigative reporters, where were the public-spirited leakers?

One example: He points to hard evidence that the Democratic National Committee knew months in advance of the planned break-in of their headquarters by a group of Cuban-Americans. The report on that pre-break-in tip-off was suppressed; the witnesses are still available, but no law enforcement agency or committee will investigate.

Mr. Lasky thinks the reason is rooted in a partisan double standard, a visceral media hatred of a political man named Nixon, and the blood-lust of a running pack.

But perhaps there is more to the amazing exchange of roles during the Second McCarthy Era, when civil libertarians became law-and-order zealots. Nobody can deny now that so much was deliberately concealed then, which might have mitigated the furor. What were the real reasons for the real cover-up?

Time will tell. Or Newsweek, whose then-Washington bureau chief, Ben Bradlee, wrote a book that is Mr. Lasky's prime source for the most damaging indictments of John F. Kennedy.

Mr. Lasky may have intended to write a rock-'em, sock-'em everybody-did-it defense of Mr. Nixon, but the import of his book is more profound. He opens a line of inquiry that demands to be followed: What made guilty politicians anxious to accuse others of their crimes, and what made innocent accusers so willing to suspend self-critical judgment?

Open your mind. Read Lasky's blockbuster; IDSWW is not like any book on the Watergate shelf.