

Watergate

This country," John Mitchell once observed in an unguarded moment, "is going to go so far to the right you won't even recognize it." It was unclear then—and it remains so now—whether he intended the remark as a promise or a threat. In either case, his words ring in our ears with deep resonance as we watch him squirm before the television klieglights and a nationwide audience.

Watergate has become the superbowl of political scandals, and like all such events, it speaks to us in its own peculiar language—somehow removed from rational political discourse. A scandal plays a unique role in the life of a nation. It is the way in which a society mentions the unmentionable, and it provides an easy insight into a country's deepest fears. England has its periodic sex scandals. Europe is currently in the throes of a major scandal over collaboration with the Nazis during the Second World War. And we in America have Watergate: a crisis about the manipulation of the political process, about the buying and selling of power, about repression and subversion.

Now it is a strange characteristic of any political scandal that its revelations are startling only to those who have chosen to ignore the evidence as it accumulated over the years. No one who has followed the career of Richard Nixon—least of all Congress and the mass media—can find very shocking the discovery that he would use bugging, provocation, burglary, blackmail, extortion, smear or innuendo against his political opponents. His campaigns have always been models of dirty politics. And if he embarked on a more ambitious plan in 1972, we should only be surprised that he is now catching hell for it.

This reaction to Watergate has provided liberal commentators with numerous opportunities to herald the system's vitality. According to the *New Yorker*, for example, it represents "the long arm of the Founding Fathers reaching down across the centuries to save our beleaguered Republic." In fact, the uproar has been orchestrated by the relatively short arms of Congressional leaders and media executives, and while they are quite naturally prone to viewing themselves as agents of the Founding Fathers, we need not be so sentimental.

For Watergate is now a crisis—rather than an incident or a caper—because they made it one. And the relevant question is: why did they decide to make this a major scandal, when they have passed up dozens of opportunities over the past quarter century to do the same thing with other equally explosive incidents? Why—to take but one example—did they ignore the enormous body of evidence which contradicted the Warren Commission report on the Kennedy assassination? Even LBJ, it turns out, did not be-

lieve that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone, and asked Ramsey Clark to investigate further. Clark, to Johnson's dismay, found nothing new, and the *New York Times* didn't care anyway. So what has caught their fancy about the lesser crimes of Watergate?

Perhaps it is not the crimes of Watergate so much as its timing. This scandal is in a sense the final punctuation mark on an historical epoch. We are passing into what political scientists call the multi-polar world. If America is still number one, it is dramatically not to the same degree as before. And our idyllic future as the New Jerusalem is clouded by energy crises, food shortages, the long death of the dollar, inflation, unemployment and other such facts of life. No longer can we call the tune without paying the piper. We have been reduced to the mundane status of other peoples and nation states.

The wave of history which began early in this century when we emerged as a superior power has crested now. We are on the face of a change and—sooner or later—will have to live with an altered view of ourselves, our unique mission in history, and our super potency. The evidence is everywhere, even in the world of sports. In this long, hot, Watergate summer, Hank Aaron approaches Babe Ruth's unbeatable homerun record and gets hate mail. It is sacrilege that he should do it, because he's black, and also because those 714 homers were hit in a better time and the great accomplishments should stay back there where they belong.

Kissinger notwithstanding, America is a nation which—for the first time in its history—has been defeated in war. No matter that the liberation forces do not yet occupy Saigon or Phnom Penh. The fact remains that America squandered its resources on imperial adventures, while its European and Asian rivals gathered their strength. As a result, the nation is emerging from the Indochina war without the global hegemony it once took for granted, and we have already begun to experience the shock waves which originated from this rearrangement of the international pecking order.

One of the first casualties has been the cold war consensus. It was the product of a unique moment in modern history: when America alone emerged unscathed—indeed strengthened—by the Second World War. At war's end, it stood victorious, in need of an ideological enemy which would enable it to shroud its imperialist expansion in the self-righteous clothing of a crusader against communism. For two decades, the consensus ruled whole arenas of inquiry off limits to scholars and journalists, and fostered illusions of the perfect society. Ours was the best country in history, the only one

by The Editors

where the sanctity of individual life and property was cherished, where the people's voice was heard.

Vietnam shattered all that. It showed us that such a people as we fantasize ourselves to be get their kicks by pulling the wings off flies. And with the illusions went the consensus. The official lies of the Vietnam era put it under severe strain, but beyond that the cold war consensus didn't seem to make sense in the post-Vietnam world. Ironically, the detente with China and Russia which gave Nixon his "peace with honor" robbed him of the very leverage he needed to establish a new consensus. He could scarcely turn around and use the threat of international communism to whip the loyal opposition into line. And thus, while a serious probe of the Kennedy assassination may have seemed to pose a real national security danger in 1965, no such considerations blocked a full-scale Watergate investigation in 1973.

If that inquiry has done nothing else, it has laid bare Nixon's vision of America after Vietnam. For his secret programs in their totality are comprehensible only as sheer lunacy (could they really have believed the revolution was at hand in 1970?) or part of an overall plan to force a conservative consensus by establishing a quasi-police state capable of maintaining domestic tranquility no matter what strains might result from runaway inflation, unemployment, famine, or war. His was an old-fashioned solution to the collapse of an empire: economic austerity and political autocracy. He built a huge campaign chest, by soliciting bribes from business and extorting contributions when necessary. He packed the Supreme Court and castrated Congress. Since the press remained in the hands of the opposition, he set out to curb the media—jailing reporters, attacking news coverage, cutting back public broadcasting, warning local stations to "balance" the network news or face loss of their licenses. Meanwhile, his aides were perfecting the art of rigging elections—thus enabling him not only to control his own party but to directly influence the opposition as well. On the public level, he gutted social programs and increased military spending. Simultaneously, his Justice Department dealt with social unrest by isolating and then smashing the extreme Left. Police agents fomented incidents for which activists were then busted—and litigated into oblivion. Those who went underground were hounded, isolated, and sometimes caught. The more dynamic leaders were assassinated. All the while, he was pumping for a mammoth bicentennial celebration, a rebirth of patriotism and religion, and the word was about that a huge campaign chest had been assembled to repeal the 22nd Amendment—thereby enabling him to run for re-election in 1976.

This scenario makes sense, in a gruesome way. It would have established the Executive as a virtual dictator, with the necessary instruments to guide the nation through a difficult time. The President would be able to wrench free the necessary funds for "defense." And though the poor would suffer, their access to power would be closed, and their potential for disruption constricted. Meanwhile, the Commander-in-Chief would be free to protect American influence overseas—perhaps even holding on to large chunks of it in Indochina.

Nixon and his German mafia had gone far toward implementing this plan when the bust of the Watergate bugging

team blew their cover. With that accidental revelation, the rest had to follow, for Nixon was in no position to establish a consensus for one-party rule.

Now Watergate has left the Nixon program in shambles. Its principal architects are in disgrace, and the President has retreated on every front but one: his detente with the Soviet Union and China continues apace. The lobby for a third Nixon term is a dim and ludicrous memory.

Having wrought havoc with the Nixon plan, the liberals are left without one of their own. Glibly, they announce that the system works. We would sleep more comfortably if we could believe that, for such a view attributes the entire fiasco to the perversity of Nixon and his aides. But perverse though they undoubtedly are, their program reflected the desperate situation which the United States now faces: no longer top dog, but not conditioned to settle for second best. Hence, John Mitchell's statement about the country moving "so far to the right you won't recognize it." We certainly do not rule out the emergence of something like a strong grassroots fascist movement in the years ahead.

For now, the liberals are in the comfortable position of being able to torpedo Nixon's program without having to formulate one of their own. That task would prove a formidable one indeed and would immediately open up all the divisions which plagued the Democratic Party last year, for it would force them to choose between empire and democracy. The most powerful elements in the Democratic Party—the ones which retook control from the McGovern forces last fall—are hopelessly compromised, having never renounced their own cold war role in promoting anti-communism at home and imperialism abroad. When Senator McGovern sought to do that and to develop an alternative program, they denounced, deserted and in the end defeated him.

It is by no means clear what old-line liberal Democrats view as the middle ground between Nixon and McGovern. In fact any administration which determines to protect the empire is likely to develop a program similar to Nixon's—with different nuances, perhaps, but essentially austere and autocratic. The non-imperialist alternative, on the other hand, would open any candidate for President to the kind of radical-baiting that defeated McGovern. It would, moreover, generate real pressure to experiment with socialism, in much the same way as the imperialist alternative invites experimentation with fascism.

If the Watergate affair demonstrates that the two-party system is still working, it does not resolve the fundamental conflicts which spawned it. Nixon has been caught on the cusp between two periods of imperialist expansion and retreat. The rejection of his program certainly bolsters the position of the broad, anti-imperialist Left. But both major parties remain firmly in the hands of those who have guided America since World War II, and we would be foolish indeed to suppose that Watergate has opened the way for victory of the non-imperialist alternative. The post-Vietnam crisis is still in its early stages. We do not know all that it holds in store for us. We can be sure, however, that in its third century, America faces political turmoil the likes of which it has never experienced before.

Historians and the Cold War

THE BATTLE OVER AMERICA'S IMAGE

