

THE MEANING OF WATERGATE

by the Rt. Rev. Richard S. Emrich

Bishop Emrich, retired Episcopal Bishop of Michigan, delivered this paper before Hillsdale College students and faculty during the first seminar this year of the Center for Constructive Alternatives, Political Morality: From Socrates to Nixon.

A recent cartoon showed a man in a travel bureau saying, "I want a ticket to some place where I won't hear about Watergate." But in spite of the warning in that cartoon, this address (non-controversial and non-partisan) is on the subject because as Americans we ought to learn from Watergate; because we ought always, like Lincoln, to seek for the meaning of great events; because we ought to come from such an experience stronger citizens and deepened in faith; and because if we cannot, grounded in our tradition, see more deeply into events than others, then our tradition would not be true.

So because we all need steadying and deepening, because (as with Lincoln) we must see that God reigns in the great affairs of men and that He has a purpose for America in this chastening, I submit the following points - non-partisan and non-controversial. My sole purpose in this address is to strengthen faith and make us into wiser citizens.

First, for some years now we have been listening to angry voices attacking our institutions, our social structures and the system, the assumption being that an evil system is corrupting good men. There is scarcely an institution that has not come under fierce attack from strident and angry voices. Good men and a wicked system, good men and corrupting structures, good men and bad institutions — this is what we have heard. We have heard this thought, which comes from

Rousseau and incites to ingratitude and rebellion, more than most of us realize. We began to be apologetic about our government, our churches, and even marriage and the home.

But now in Watergate, and all that the word implies, we are facing a more profound truth — that men corrupt good institutions, that the corruption must be traced back to the human heart, and that it is our much maligned institutions that are carrying us through this present storm. So my first point is that in Watergate we see the strength, wisdom, and carrying power of institutions, and the weakness and corruptibility of men. We can recover through Watergate confidence in our institutions and an old realism about human nature.

When the Founding Fathers formed our government, they had, based upon Scripture, the wide study of history and their own experience, a deep skepticism about human nature. They knew that power has a tendency to corrupt, that men must be watched and records audited. And, therefore, they set up a system of checks and balances, of a free press, of a freedom which led to parties which would constantly turn a searchlight on those in power.

In brief, they had human nature and things like Watergate in mind when they formed our government, and our government with its ability to correct

and reform itself was designed with such corruption in mind. Sometimes we hear people say that we believe in a democratic form of government because we believe that men are good. That is more false than true. We hold to our form of government, rather, because we know that men cannot be trusted completely with power, and, therefore, we want the rule of law and checks and balances.

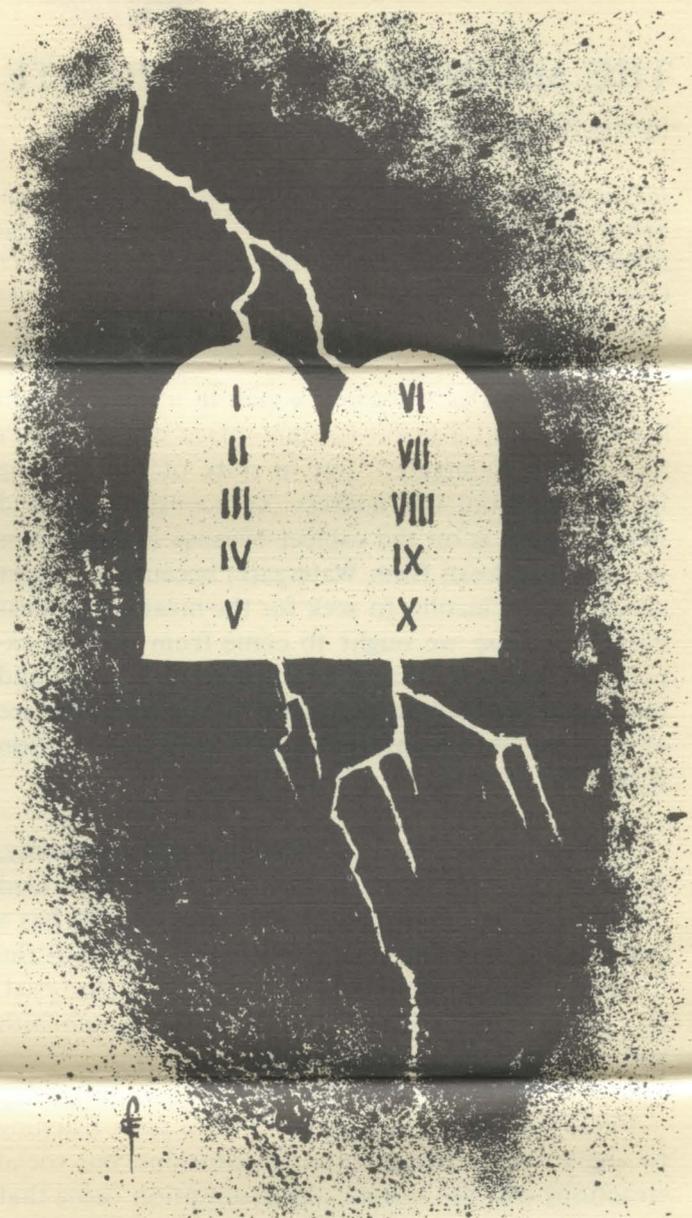
My first point, then, is that there is wisdom in the system, that we have a great form of government able to correct itself, that the attempt by men to misuse power should not surprise educated people, and that the system will save us. In spite of the inevitable imperfections of life, we must learn to see the value of our institutions — our homes, schools, churches, businesses, and government; for when they are strong, our life is good. They are the carriers of the tradition that binds us to our fathers, they embody a corporate wisdom which is greater than that of any individual, and they carry us through storms. Thank God for the Constitution.

Our second point is that we should see in the whole Watergate scandal the reality of, and the workings of, the moral law. The moral law was broken by men in and around the White House, and the reverberations of that misuse of power have weakened the government, influenced our foreign policy, weakened the stock market, lowered the value of the dollar, and created a government crisis. It's like the reverberation of thunder in the hills. Why? What is the moral law?

Well, it is a law which we did not make but discover, which we did not devise but observe, and which has been shown to us by revelation and reason — that our life together in home, school, business, government, and everywhere is based upon trust, honor, integrity, and reliability. That is a law as firm in its own way as the law of gravity. When Dr. Johnson was asked if there was honor and truth in hell, he replied in effect, "Of course, otherwise hell could not exist." The same is true of the Mafia.

When, therefore, there was wrong-doing, bugging, deception, and the misuse of power, it had to be covered up, for no government can govern if trust is lost — the moral law. And then, of course, they had to cover up the cover-up, and then cover up the cover-up of the cover-up. "Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive."

Government is weakened because trust is weakened, for the average man says quite reasonably, "If they have done this and that, what else have they done?" It's the old story of the grandfather's clock that struck 13. Not only was the last note absurd, but it cast doubt on all the other notes.



This is what Senator Sam Ervin meant when he quoted the seventh verse of the sixth chapter of Galatians: "Be not deceived; God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." He was saying with Paul that God is no weakly benevolent and sentimental grandpappy who does not particularly care about human evil. No, He so rules His world that subtly and sometimes slowly, and often obviously, a man reaps what he sows. We do not make a fool of God, who creates and destroys, who judges men and nations.

One witness spoke of "The unbearable qualms of conscience," and we can easily imagine the sleepless nights of some of the people involved. Subtly and inwardly we reap what we plant. But there is more. If a group of men bug, steal, plot, lie, and deceive in this connection and that connection, God has so structured His world that we begin to ask, "What else have they done? And what more will they do?" We reap the loss of trust and confidence that weakens the government and influences us all.

If one makes an enemy of the press, it is not surprising if some parts of the press express their enmity — "For with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again." And if confidence is lost, how is it restored? That is the question with which the present government of the greatest nation on earth is now struggling. One witness was asked, "Since you may have given false testimony under oath on prior occasions, is there really any reason to believe your testimony before this committee?" We reap what we sow. God is not mocked.

The word "fear" as used in Scripture ("The fear of the Lord") does not, as you know, mean terror, for terror destroys judgment and can cripple the soul. No, it means awe, respect, reverence, and veneration before Him who has made this world, holds it in His hand, and has the final power. And with that meaning of the word we say, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." This is the great underlying truth to be learned from the tragedy of Watergate.

In the light of our spiritual heritage, in the light of the divine common sense given to us by the Scriptures, in the light of the Law and the Gospel, we can say that Watergate was a supreme stupidity. Men thought in their arrogance that they were clever and wise — and they were fools. They ruined a presidency that had great promise. God is not mocked.

Third, what is the meaning of Watergate? If a child is punished without seeing the meaning and purpose of the punishment, that leads to bitterness and cynicism. So it is with us. What then is the purpose and meaning of the punishment we are now undergoing? It is this:

Fellow-Americans of a differing political party were treated as if they were enemies - not as fellow-citizens in a different party, not as members of the loyal opposition with whom we debate, not as friends

with whom we fiercely disagree, but as enemies whom you bug, to whom you lie, and from whom you steal. That, as Stewart Alsop says, is not politics — it is war. And that is why, no matter what the pain, this whole matter must be exposed, so thoroughly exposed that we corporately learn a lesson and cast such things from our midst.

The Civil War was so costly and so decisive that probably no statesman or state will ever again seriously advocate secession. We learned that lesson. We can hope that the Watergate affair was so costly and the judgment of the people so decisive that no politician or party will ever advocate such methods again, for our form of government could not survive if we ever adopted the practice of treating our political opponents as enemies.

And if someone reacts cynically and says, "Everyone does it, but these persons just happened to be caught," or "This thing is puffed up out of all proportion" or "Why so much fuss about what simply would not receive much notice on a police blotter?" we must reply: (1) It is not true that everyone does it. There is honor in government as in all professions. If we react cynically, the essential poison of Watergate has entered into us.

(2) While there is in a country as large as this one crookedness and conniving in various precincts and counties, that is quite a different matter from finding it inspired by the White House. If the heart is diseased, the total body is in mortal danger.

(3) It is, of course, true that big and awful things have been decided by men in power — things so awful that the taping of a door or a little piece of electronic equipment seem as nothing. But the big and awful decisions of men in power are defensible because of their necessity, because they are choices between evils, because nothing in politics can be considered right or wrong apart from the circumstances. And what circumstances, what other threatening evil, what necessity made this action defensible? It was the spirit of enmity, the deliberate misuse of power, and the assumption that some are above the laws that made this an evil that must be eradicated.

Fourth, I have as a clergyman thought about our souls as we have watched the hearings and reacted to them. St. Paul says in First Corinthians XIII that, "Love does not rejoice in iniquity," because he knows well that our grubby human race does

rejoice in evil, and, like a gossip, licks its chops over the latest dirt. And we are not wrong when we say that some newspapers, some partisan groups and individuals, have looked with relish upon the proceedings and hoped for the worst. They have rejoiced in iniquity.

(1) Our government has been weakened, and in a dangerous world it is the only government we have.

(2) Suppose television and the great press services were to focus attention on the worst thing that you and I have ever done—that hidden matter that every man has on his conscience and for which he needs forgiveness. In brief, what is your Watergate? What's mine?

(3) Watergate is really a symptom of a deep moral sickness and confusion in which the whole nation is involved. Have labor unions broken no laws to attain their ends? Has big business greased the palms of no politicians? Can we teach Madison Avenue anything about twisting the truth?

This does not mean that we will not condemn the evil of Watergate, but it does mean that we will do so with sorrow, and without a blind self-righteousness, without hard hearts, and without hurting our souls.

Fifth, looking into the inner lives of men, how do things like Watergate happen? Let me venture a theory, basing it on the thought of St. Paul who, you will remember, says that the visible world is temporal, but that the world invisible is eternal. Let me contrast in our experience the visible and invisible world.

The visible world is all around us — the hills, the college, the sports, the buying and selling, the traffic, etc. It is real, vivid, fascinating, in the foreground, and while it passes away, it absorbs most of our interest. It is obvious, though it contains also hidden and mysterious depths.

The unseen world also is real, though different. It seems to be somewhat in the background of life, not so vivid, sometimes hidden, and to many people, therefore, not so real as what they can see, hear, and handle. But like St. Paul we experience the transience of this visible world against an eternal background. We have an experience of the permanent in the midst of change, and we commune with this eternal world when our hearts are thankful, when we have a sense of obligation, guilt, awe, wonder, and a peace this world cannot give. The central business of religion is to keep us in the right relation to the world invisible.

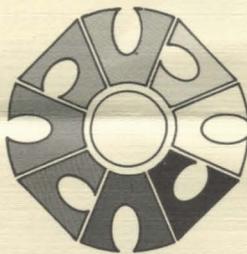
But, if we love our country and feel the pain of scarred lives, if we love God and know that He wants malice toward none, we will know sorrow and compassion. Here are three considerations that can help to give us a proper perspective.

by trying to get the people to forget Watergate. If a man's real authority is in the hearts of the people, how can we escape that conclusion?

That brings us to the tapes, and I can only here reflect on what I think Edmund Burke would say about those tapes. The President seems to be standing absolutely on the principle of the separation of powers. Burke pointed out that it is possible for men to lose all common sense and prudence as they take their stand on "the principle of the thing." After all, since other principles are involved (no man should be above the laws or be a judge in his own case), no one principle can claim to be absolute.

Compromise, which is essential to all social existence, is necessary.

This, in my opinion, is what Judge Sirica was saying in his judgment. I do not know enough about the law to say that Judge Sirica was right, but I do admire the common sense and prudence of his words. The President has a right to confidentiality, and the country has a right to affirm that no man is above the law. Until the tapes are in some manner released the doubts and suspicions of the people will remain. Since no one principle can be an absolute, the President should be actively seeking a decent compromise.



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The second CCA seminar for this academic year, *The American Communications Media: A Study in Credibility*, will discuss bias in newspapers, radio, and television.

Participating, with the students and faculty of Hillsdale College, will be:

Mr. John Chamberlain
author and journalist

Mr. John R. Coyne, Jr.
*special assistant in the office
of the Vice President of the United States*

Dr. Edward J. Epstein
author and journalist

Mr. Sam Donaldson
ABC News

Mr. Frank Shakespeare
Former USIA director

Dr. Paul Weaver, associate editor
The Public Interest

Mr. Lemuel Boulware
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