



# A Letter to the Watergate Committee

Gentlemen:

The questions with which you have been confronting yourselves — the questions which, in fact, brought your committee into being — are obviously these: How could men so high in a government that is presumably as open and above board as ours is supposed to be become so venal, secretive, partisan, narrowly self-righteous and even criminal? What are the conditions and the atmosphere that made it easy for them to do so? And aside from more or less obvious restrictive regulations governing fund-raising and disbursing, is there any change in the executive structure of the federal government which we could reasonably make — is there a deficiency here that can be sensibly repaired so as to change the atmosphere that encouraged men to commit the Watergate crimes and the White House “horrors”?

The answer to this last question is: yes! It is now time for us to consider a government change; the institution of a new office which is part of every major government in the world today except ours. But before we consider this proposal closely, which to many Americans might seem too radical but to almost everyone else would seem tame, we need to examine at least briefly the attitudes of mind it is meant to rectify.

When we ask how it is that the White House corps and the Committee for the Re-election of the President felt free to act as they did, we find that they naturally saw little wrong with doing what they did for many reasons.

First of all, they were conditioned to believe that results are what count, and they had seen that what they were doing had worked in getting Nixon elected to earlier offices.

Next, they were conditioned to believe that while sportsmanship is a good thing, it is simply American to feel that if you can get around a rule in order to win, you get around it and win. The name of the game is winning. Not only our professional football, but even our college amateur football, teams are conducted on that principle — the Vince Lombardi principle. If it is American to play football in this way, why not that other “game,” politics.

Strengthening this belief, making it something to be taken for granted, is the notion that ours is a

free-enterprise system that is based on competition. If a big corporation can put a small businessman out of business by price-cutting, extravagant claims, meretricious products promoted through motivational research and trickery — well, why not? “Competition is the lifeblood of industry.” Anything goes that you can get away with.

Then, again, there is the habit of thinking in militaristic terms, a habit firmly established now in many American minds. Consider how we speak of the “conquest” of nature or of space, the war on crime, the war on poverty, the “fight” against disease or inflation, to say nothing of the cold war. If every force we deal with is considered as an “enemy,” there is little reason for excepting political opponents or parties.

Indeed, in politics, especially those of a democratic country, we have unusual sanction for treating our opponents as enemies. Politics, after all, is a form of cold “war.”

For the Watergate bumblers, in fact, it became that worst of all wars, a patriotic holy war. For, whereas in any ordinary war *almost* anything goes, in a war waged by fanatics *anything* goes. In it, actions that you would ordinarily consider wrong you now have every right to take. After all, you are fighting, are you not, for the very existence of your (sacred) country?

Whether you are venal or not is of little consequence. If you are fighting an enemy who is disrupting your country, and you can gain help from anyone at a price, you pay that price, even if doing so means taking a bribe, with a tacit understanding that you will give the necessary *quid pro quo* when he needs it. What, then, is wrong about a Vesco, an ITT, or any other such deal? It gets you the money you need to gain the power you need to save your country, doesn't it?

Nor is there anything wrong with secrecy and espionage. No one can conduct a war successfully who tips his hand to his enemy or fails to spy upon him in every way possible. Just as there would be nothing illegal about bugging Hitler's headquarters, so there is really nothing wrong about bugging Larry O'Brien's.

Again, there is really nothing strange about carrying out orders (as almost everyone from ex-CIA members and Cuban patriots on up to the Attorney General did) unquestioningly – without any curiosity or dissent. This is simply being a good soldier. Nor should higher officers care much about how their orders are carried out. Why should anyone waste time questioning ends (as dictated from above) or means (as adopted from below)? Results are what count.

Moreover, it is foolish to maintain that actions like bribery and espionage are strictly partisan. They are simply patriotic in the ordinarily understood sense of the term. Look, we all believe, don't we, that in a democracy the majority rules; and that when, in an election, the majority has spoken, the winner has been given a mandate from the people, the nation? Any group that objects to the terms of the mandate is objecting to the people and is, therefore, nothing less than a traitor. And, obviously, traitors inside our borders should be treated with no more respect for their rights than we give to traitors outside our borders.

It is absurd to say that we have no right to maintain that we are for law and order while we at the same time perform or sanction breaking-and-entering, money-lending, burglary and wiretapping. Of course, we are for law and order even when, trying to assure it, we have to perform – as in all warfare – acts like these which would be under ordinary conditions illegal acts. When you are conducting a war for justice, you still conduct it as a war.

In this war, as in external wars, the President is clearly the Commander-in-Chief of our forces whether they are bearing arms or not. He must be given every means he requires, executive privilege included, to act privately and at will. As the doctrine of separation of powers suggests, Mr. America was not meant to be hamstrung by the legalisms so much cherished by our subversives.

The trouble with all this is, of course, that it is nonsense, dangerous nonsense. We are not engaged in a civil war; and dissenters, even violent dissenters, are not necessarily traitors. The rules of military secrecy and espionage do not, therefore, apply here. The voice of the majority is not the voice of the whole nation. Illegal acts in peacetime are not the same as illegal acts in warfare. The President is not elected to be Mr. America, but only to be the Chief Executive, for a few years, of the *government*. He is Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces only – and even here, properly, constitutionally, with the advice and consent of the Congress. And, as a citizen, he has as much but no more right to privacy than any other citizen.

What we obviously need to do, then, under our present circumstances, is make it difficult for any President who does not recognize these facts to gain office and exercise privileges to which he has no

right. Clearly, this requirement means that we must make it difficult for him to buy his way into office; and we must rob him of a certain illegitimate glamor as Mr. America which enables him to defend his executive and political actions as if they could never be questioned patriotically.

The first of these measures is already being taken – though, at this writing, much more remains to be done, as Common Cause and others suggest. But the second measure—that of stripping the Presidency of an illegitimate and dangerously seductive glamor – may call for a radical change in our government, one which, as has been said, will, for the first time, bring it into line with the pattern of every other important civilized government in the world.

As I have recently written, in *The Humanization of Man*, we now have in our country the anomalous spectacle of a man who is at once a chief client (as representative of the nation) and the chief artist-professional serving that nation. When he wishes to evade criticism as a partisan or be held accountable as chief executive, he can take refuge under the shield of his being, after all, Mr. America, and therefore beyond patriotic scrutiny. He can use silver trumpets to drown out raucous laughter. And he is in the advantageous position (for him) of having the opportunity to make all his reports to the nation special pleadings, in defense of himself and his administration – as if any such thing could ever be done with truly useful objectivity.

What I should like to suggest, then, is that we at least consider doing what every other civilized nation has long since done: maintain two heads of state analogous to constitutional monarch and prime minister, or president and premier. The one (the Chief Citizen, perhaps) would represent the nation; the other, the President, would represent the government.

The tasks of the Chief Citizen would be of two kinds. He would, as national figurehead, attend all purely official welcomes of visiting heads of state and ambassadorial or goodwill groups, all dedications, memorial exercises and the like. And he would give at least four nationwide radio-and-television reports to the nation, using only the facts about our economic, political, social, educational conditions, etc., afforded him by the official documents to be found in the Government Printing Office or by such bodies as the Koerner Commission or the Cranston. These reports would have no political bias: they would present simply the kinds of facts (about crime, pollution, highway deaths, etc.) available in official publications but almost never brought home to most Americans.

But how could such a person be chosen wisely? Would he not be appointed by the President and therefore be inevitably partisan? Is there any method which would guarantee both his impartiality, his rhetorical competence and his suitability as a symbol worthy of the nation? Perhaps not one that would



regularly meet all three equally well, but may I suggest one that, despite its apparent strangeness, seems remarkably sound.

Let the Supreme Court be given another, a tenth, member. Then let these ten choose from among themselves the man who is to be for the next three years the Chief Citizen. The Court then would still have nine members, so that it would not be adversely affected on that score; and we should have an unusually carefully selected personage to be the titular head of our nation.

Some of the advantages of this plan to the Court are fairly obvious. The office could hardly be sought ambitiously and self-servingly; the chances are, rather, that it would seem unwelcome: most Justices would rather be Justices. The fairly frequent shift in the composition of the Court might serve to keep it unusually flexible and alert to different points of view — organically alive, rather than rigid. Every three years one of its members would return renewed by experiences and studies that would help him and other members be aware of the actual state of the nation, as seen from something other than the close atmosphere of judicial chambers.

Moreover, this plan would make tests of a Supreme

Court appointee by the President and the Congress even more searching than they are now; for he would have to be someone who could function as both Justice and Chief Citizen — not as Justice only. The Chief Citizen would ultimately have to be seen as one who should be able to meet the requirements not only of the President and the Congress but also of the Supreme Court.

Even the President would benefit not a little. He is now, unquestionably, overburdened. Any President who wanted to be something other than an Image who is to “go down in history” would welcome relief from all the chores of the Chief Citizen: “Hail to the Chief”. . . and all that.

But, however many benefits would accrue to the Supreme Court from the establishment of the office of Chief of the Nation (or Chief Citizen), these would be as naught to the values it would have in preventing the recurrence of Watergate. For the special “separation of powers” which it would effect would help the electorate to see many things clearly about which it is now much confused. That the President is only the Chief Executive of the government. That to become even that, he must be the head of a party. That he is, therefore, first of all, a partisan who does not necessarily represent anything more than a carefully (and expensively) persuaded majority. That the minority has its rights as what the English call His (or Her) Majesty’s *Loyal Opposition*, who are by no means to be treated as traitors — “enemies” who can legitimately have “dirty tricks” played on them in a militaristic way. That, consequently, future Presidents may no longer rely on money, executive privilege or anything else to help them convince the public that they alone are patriotic and above mere legality. Another effect may be to suggest that if it is good to have an ombudsman for the nation as a whole, maybe we should have a similar office, as have several countries now, for every other level of government.

Finally, the office of Chief (or Chief Citizen) may do more than anything else to bring us together as Americans who are members of one nation, since the office may turn out, much earlier than the Presidency, to be occupied by a Jew, by a black or — who knows? — even by a woman.

Gentlemen: I hope this letter has been of some use to you, if only as a means of aiding you to clarify your position through disagreeing with it.

Yours sincerely,

John Julian Ryan

*Department of English and Philosophy  
St. Anselm’s College  
Manchester, N.H.*