

THE PRESIDENT-HATERS *(Originally published June 1973)*

Once on a visit to Washington in 1962, we voiced a strong dislike of President Kennedy and his administration's tactics to a friend who headed a major network's TV news bureau there. "The trouble with you guys," he said, "is that you're a bunch of President-haters."

He explained that no matter who is serving as Chief Executive, there is traditionally always such a group. In the past there were Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln-haters; more recently, Roosevelt, Truman and even Eisenhower-haters; Kennedy and Johnson-haters were plentiful; and now the Nixon-haters. In the case of Kennedy, he went on to say that he had met him on several occasions and just two nights before had sat beside him at a dinner and found him utterly charming and likable.

Although we inferred from his explanation that professional newsmen were above this sort of petty prejudice and had to be dispassionate in their judgment of the famous, we took the observation with a grain of salt. Some time later, toward the end of the Johnson years, we had the satisfaction of hearing this same friend complain bitterly that LBJ was undoubtedly the crudest, most unscrupulous and unprincipled man ever to occupy the White House.

It is certainly true that there have been, and will always be, President-haters. It is not true that this contingent hates the office itself or that its make-up remains the same from one administration to the next. Nor can the press claim to be free of prejudice in this regard. (That the press does not treat all candidates impartially was evident during the Johnson-Goldwater campaign.)

It is also hard to believe, for example, that the influential sector of the press—the so-called New York-Washington axis—would have pursued the Watergate affair quite so vigorously had it involved the administration of Jack Kennedy. In fact, although admitting at the time that vote fraud scandals in Texas and Illinois gave the election to Kennedy, they chose to make no issue of it. They also made frequent mention of the "ruthless" tactics, and the "strong-arm, hard-nose" methods of intimidation employed by the Kennedy staff, but accepted them, often with amused admiration, as normal occurrences in an era of modern, sophisticated politics. Nor did the press choose to pursue toward its logical conclusions the Bobby Baker scandal of Johnson's time with any sustained effort.

Our modern general public, accustomed to high-level chicanery since the days of Franklin Roosevelt, has been educated and conditioned by the press in the last decade or so—and particularly since the advent of under-cover and high-handed techniques initiated by the energetic, forceful Kennedy organization—to accept deceit and skullduggery in politics as standard operating procedure.

One might have expected, then, that the Watergate episode, wherein one set of political

hatchet-men spied on another set of political hatchet-men, got caught at it and then progressed to the usual denials and cover-up, could have been tolerated just as easily by a cynical press as previous scandals have been tolerated.

It seems apparent that one major factor which set Watergate apart has been an unusually strong and large group of President-haters among the influential press. But we Kennedy-haters definitely feel put upon. We see no reason why today's Nixon-haters should be given preferential treatment and such great satisfaction.

One can be sure, whatever the outcome of Watergate, that when the next Chief Executive moves into the White House—and especially if he turns out to be either Teddy Kennedy or Spiro Agnew—there will be more than enough dedicated President-haters around to carry on the tradition in grand fashion.

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