

Déjà Vu All Over Again

On Sunday I had that strange and ubiquitous feeling of what Yogi Berra allegedly called “déjà vu all over again.” Is it possible that President Trump and his best buddies really did collude with the Russians to undermine the campaign of Hillary Clinton? Of course, no one knows as of yet; but the itch of curiosity is just beginning to be scratched.

My first law job was with Henry Rothblatt in New York City. Rothblatt was known for, among other things, representing military men who were “just following orders.” He became the darling of the right and the enemy of the left by defending Col. Oran Henderson, who was alleged to have covered up the My Lai Massacre in Vietnam. Henderson was acquitted of the charge. Henry was a fascinating and curious creature.

Enter Watergate. Four so-called “Miami Men” also referred to as “plumbers” broke into the Watergate to steal secrets of the Democratic Party on behalf of CRP, the Campaign to Reelect the President. The President was Richard Nixon. Henry Rothblatt decided to defend the plumbers based upon the principle that they were just following orders.

At the time, I was a struggling law student at Georgetown in Washington DC. Somebody in Rothblatt’s office remembered me, probably his able manager, Maggie Haddock. I was asked if I would be willing to work for Mr. Rothblatt. I quit an excellent job at Frosh, Lane & Edson on Connecticut Avenue, and went to work on what was supposed to be the “case of the century.”

Fascinating people were a dime a dozen at that time. Carl Bernstein interviewed me in the hallways of the federal courthouse. He wanted to know if it was true that the Miami Men were receiving “hush money” to plead guilty. Of course I knew absolutely nothing, and told that to the soon to be famous journalist. He said, “Well if you don’t answer, I will assume the answer is ‘yes.’” I was outraged, but fortunately it was just a tease. He did not publish anything about his boring, lack-luster interview with me.

The “Miami Men” decided to plead guilty, and suddenly I was out of a job. A mysterious knock came on the door of my dumpy apartment in Foggy Bottom. There, standing at the door late in the evening was Henry Rothblatt himself, dapper as he always was in his black suit, white shirt and black necktie. He asked if he could come in, and of course he was admitted. He told me that I was going to be laid off, along with the other employees, because the plumbers were pleading guilty. He seemed genuinely to feel badly for me, and asked whether he could give me a reference for another job. I told him that my wish and dream was to work as a clerk to a well-respected federal judge.

Before Rothblatt left my apartment, he asked whether I had any questions. I said, “Do you think Richard Nixon was involved?” Even Henry Rothblatt, with all his knowledge and access to the men working on behalf of the Republican Party, said that he was not sure and

did not think so, “Cliff, it was Maurice Stans [Secretary of Commerce] and John Mitchell [Attorney General].”

Not long thereafter, I found myself working in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, for the remarkable Malcolm Muir. Every morning, as the Watergate hearings were progressing, Muir would review the transcript printed in *The New York Times* with the Senior Law Clerk, John Humphrey, and me. Was Nixon guilty or not? Muir was sure that Nixon was personally involved and guilty as hell.

What made this portion of the Watergate story all the more memorable was that Muir was himself a Nixon nominee, whose commission to the federal court was cosigned by John Mitchell. How odd are the twist and turns of inexorable fate?

Well, it turned out that the paranoid Nixon was personally involved with the Watergate break-in. President Nixon simply believed that he could not afford to let his enemies get the upper hand.

As others have written, there is a haunting similarity between Donald Trump and Richard Nixon. Donald Trump, although a man with great skill and unleashed ability, suffers from a delusion that he is surrounded by enemies who he must defeat. For those who forget the relish of Republican resistance against the Clintons when Bill Clinton was in the White House, all one has to do is recall the forty million dollars or so that prosecutor Starr spent to demonstrate Bill Clinton’s sexual forays with Monica Lewinsky. Hatred, particularly political hatred, knows no bounds, whether it be Republican or Democrat.

The Republicans who sought the impeachment of the hapless sex addict, Bill Clinton, were merciless. Democrats, in turn, portrayed George Bush as a near war criminal. The Democrats sought revenge through Barack Obama, who would make no compromise with the enemies of his, at times, unrealistic visions. Trump, we are told, is simply insane.

Separating the wheat from the chaff, as we must, the question remains as to whether President Trump was so motivated to keep another Clinton out of the White House that he thought it worth any price to defeat the she-devil herself. Given the history of our poisoned politics since the beginning of the Bill Clinton presidency, it would not be surprising to learn that Trump and his cadre did indeed conspire with the Russians. The Russians, thought some, might be less poisonous to American exceptionalism than another Clinton in the White House. Never mind that the Clinton Foundation and Clinton associates danced with pugnacious Putin.

When I asked Henry Rothblatt whether Richard Nixon was “personally involved,” he also volunteered, “Cliff, only time, in its unrelenting integrity, will tell.” Henry Rothblatt could have added “time and relentless research.” The truth will come to light sooner or later, but it would not be any great surprise if President Trump and his supporters were so fearful of a Hillary Clinton presidency that they thought the Russians less dangerous than Queen Jezebel, who personally persecuted and killed the prophets of the Lord.

*Clifford A. Rieders, Esquire
Rieders, Travis, Humphrey,
Waters & Dohrmann
161 West Third Street
Williamsport, PA 17701
(570) 323-8711 (telephone)
(570) 323-4192 (facsimile)*

Cliff Rieders, who practices law in Williamsport, is Past President of the Pennsylvania Trial Lawyers Association and a member of the Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority. None of the opinions expressed necessarily represent the views of these organizations.