

20 JUL 1973
STAT

Watergates, Watergates Everywhere

By Pablo Neruda

ISLA NEGRA, Chile—My memory is not too good: so that I cannot tell the day exactly, nor month, nor year—but I believe that, no more than five years ago, something strange happened in Montevideo, capital of Uruguay. Opposite the Soviet Embassy, there was a quiet-looking house, several stories high, and surrounded with gardens. But very few residents. In fact, it seemed to be vacant. I don't know just what incident led to the opening up of that rather somber building. What was found there, however, created something of a sensation. The whole place was a vast telephone exchange, operated by a handful of people, quite invisible, who got lost there and haven't been found to this day. Every phone call, private conversation, burst of laughter and even snore of the Russians was monitored, taped, indexed and sent off from that building to the C.I.A. in the United States.

The truth is that the famous Watergate revelations might well astound Americans, but are scarcely going to surprise us Latin Americans. We have been used for some years now to finding intelligence services and their agents provocateurs, visible and invisible, even in the very soup on our dinner tables.

During World War II, when I was Consul General for my country in Mexico, and while British, Russian and American armies were finishing off the Hitlerite forces, I asked your great poet Archibald MacLeish to find some work for a very talented young Spanish poet who had a wife and kids to feed. His name was Petere and he lived in Mexico. MacLeish agreed and found him a job teaching Spanish. Young

Petere got to the American Consulate in Mexico City, with this job in his pocket, thinking that a visa would be a mere formality. In fact he got the third degree. While he sweated it out, various inquisitors, taking turns, asked such questions as these:

What were you up to at the railway station on April 23, at 11 A.M.?

Answer: I was saying good-by to a friend.

Inquisitor: Name?

Answer: Pablo Neruda.

Inquisitor: Where was he going?

Answer: I think it was Acapulco.

Inquisitor: What was the meaning of those hand gestures you made when the train was leaving?

Answer: It's the Spanish way of saying good-by.

Naturally, he didn't get the visa—in spite of the kind efforts of the Librarian of Congress. The C.I.A. said no and no it was.

So in this way it was known that I'd made a trip to Acapulco. They had magnetic tapes or video tapes, and kilometric tapes that spied on us from all sides, from the railway station right into our underwear.

And all this happened while the Battle of Stalingrad was grinding German pride down for all time. Quite a story!

From then on, we here in Latin America have been intercepted in Chile, during the time of President González Videla, favorite C.I.A. friend. In Cuba, at the Bay of Pigs (with unfortunate consequences for the C.I.A.). In Santo Domingo (with the same consequences for Santo Domingo and the prestige of the United States), and now the I.T.T. in Chile again: how splendid it all is! Don't let's even mention Bolivia: what would be the use?

Americans, rather like certain husbands, are the last to know. Very sad, but even more ridiculous than sad. How do they manage to know everything that goes on in the world minus what goes on in the White House?

I happened once to be sitting next to a leading socialite at a New York dinner table. Picking a topic that might interest us both, I got onto Puerto Rico. She didn't know what it was all about. She didn't know they spoke Spanish. She didn't know that Puerto Rico was an American colony. And still less, of course, did she know that the Puerto Ricans want to be, and could be, an independent republic like the other nations of Latin America. This lady of good faith cried out aloud and declared then and there to all the other guests that she had just discovered an embarrassing fact. "We should liberate that country immediately," she said, "it's unthinkable that the United States should have colonies!" What a very nice lady!

And now the Watergate scandal! How many novelties for the ever fresh eyes and ears of the Americans! How artless can you get?

Are you going to need a scandal per day to know the truth about what you are and what you should be?

It's not that I wish you 365 Watergates a year. But if you persist in all this, you'll be bound to have them.

Which would be very useful for our mutual understanding. Useful to you, Americans, and to us, Latin Americans. Cleanliness is useful to the whole world.

Pablo Neruda, Chilean poet and Nobel laureate, was also in his country's diplomatic service for many years. This article was translated by Nathaniel Tarn.

STAT