The 50th Anniversary of Watergate

ISSUE 010
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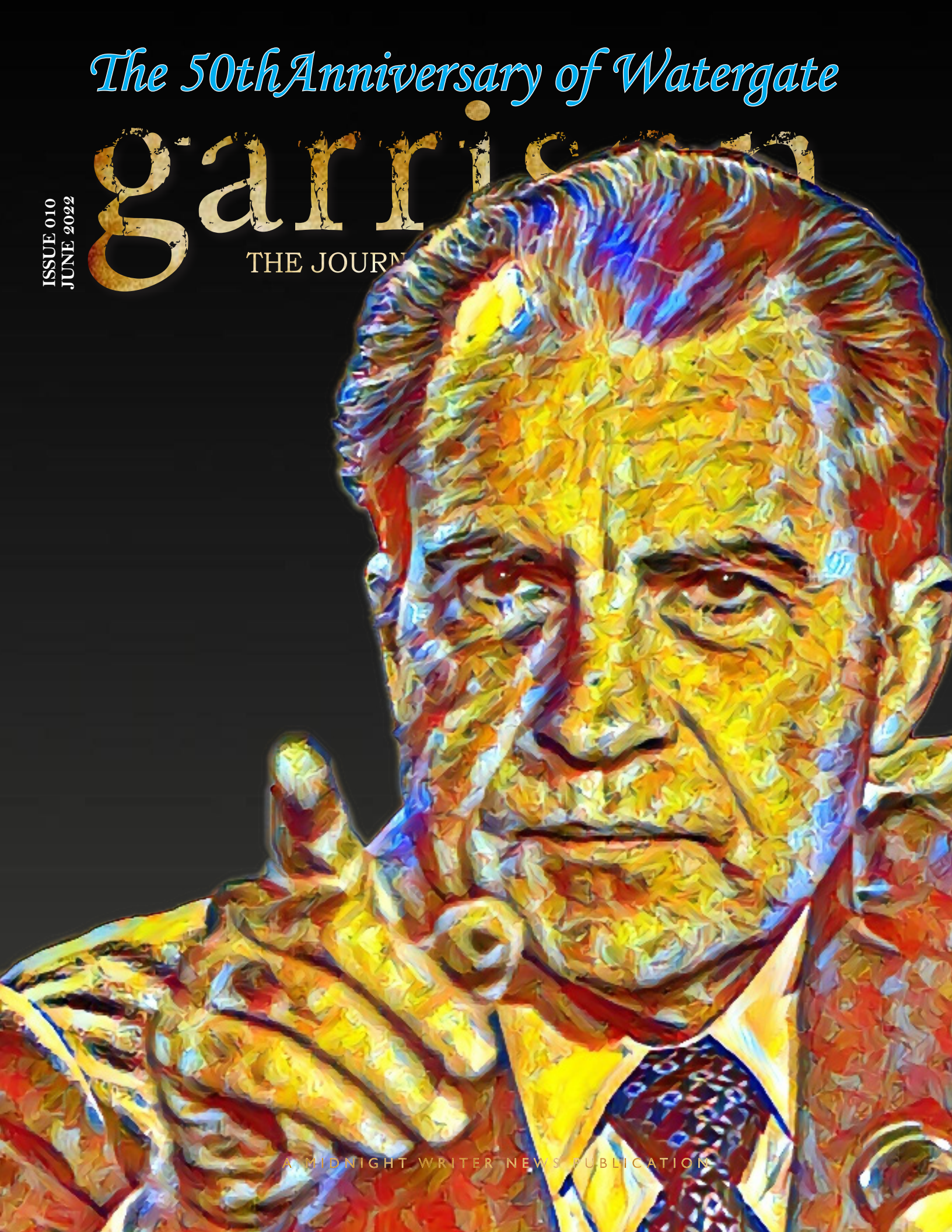
garrison

THE JOURN



A MIDNIGHT WRITER NEWS PUBLICATION

THE JOURNAL OF HISTORY & DEEP POLITICS

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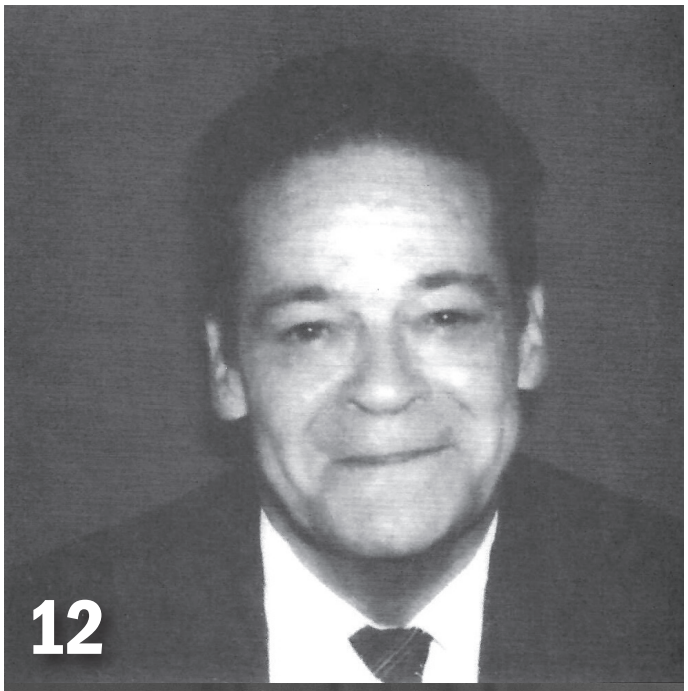

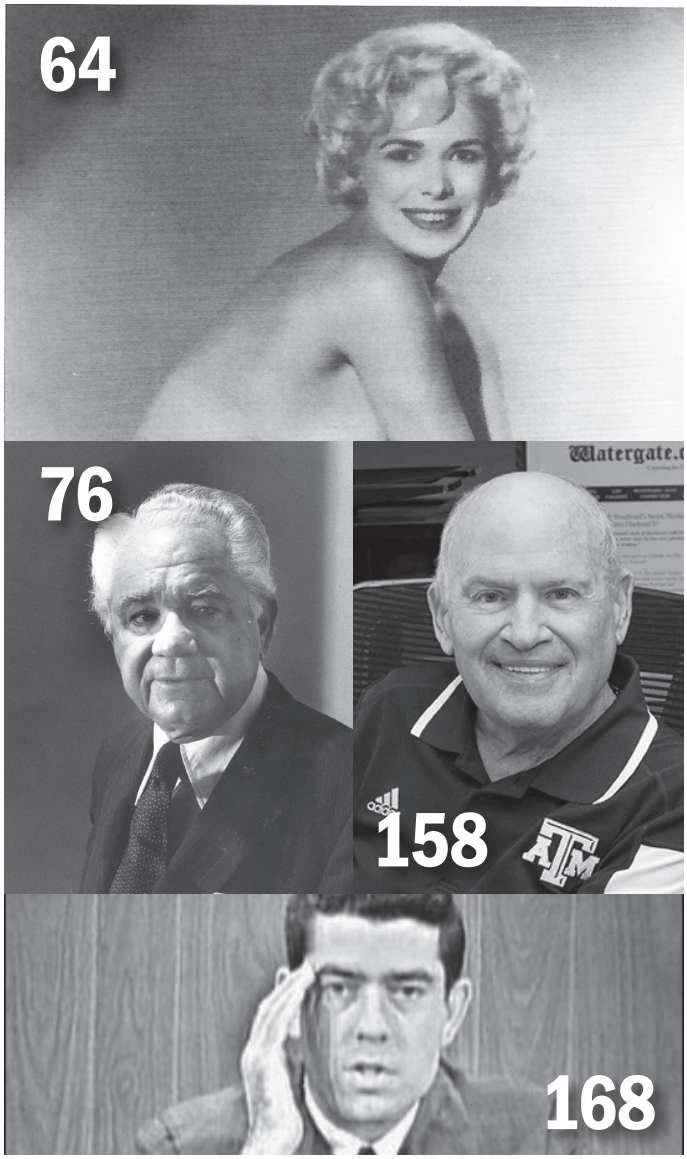

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COMING IN SEPT! GARRISON 011

A Eulogy for Len Colodny

BY JAMES ROSEN

"Nixon used a slightly different voice in talking to Haig," wrote Monica Crowley in July 1999. "It was almost as if he wanted Haig to think he knew something about him."

Now familiar as a conservative commentator and former assistant secretary of the Treasury, Crowley, just a few years before writing those words, had served as a foreign policy aide to the ex-president, and had published two important books about her time with him: *Nixon Off the Record* (1996) and *Nixon in Winter* (1998).

"Haig never groveled or tried to ingratiate himself to compensate for a Watergate double-cross, but he always kept up a correspondence," she added. "Strange. RN may have suspected more than he let on and was toying with Haig. That may also explain why RN never demanded the truth from Haig about his association with Woodward...let the accusation float out there, unvoiced. THAT is something RN would have done."

These insights, previously unpublished, come from a review of my correspondence, which spanned thirty years and several technologies, with the late Len Colodny: the diminutive and fearless liquor salesman-turned-bestselling Watergate historian who died in July 2021 at eighty-three. Len had forwarded me the email from Monica, a mutual friend, as part of a multifaceted, multi-generational effort by the Maryland native to rewrite the history of "the quintessential public controversy," and to inspire younger writers—trained reporters and historians—to follow his lead.

He succeeded at both.

* * *

We first met when Len came to pick me up at Tampa International Airport in the summer of 1992. I was twenty-two and freshly embarked, with a $5,000 grant from William F. Buckley, Jr., on what turned out to be a grueling seventeen-year odyssey to research, write, and publish *The Strong Man: John Mitchell and the Secrets of Watergate* (2008). Across that long journey and others, Len Colodny played for me the roles of mentor, booster, counselor, agitator, mediator, provocateur, sounding board, source, and loyal friend. Len was flawed, as we all are, but he was a *mensch*: Yiddish for a good soul, on the side of the angels.

Soon after I had begun my research, the year before, Jerris Leonard, a former assistant attorney general under John Mitchell and executor of Mitchell's estate, had told me I *had* to read a new book about Watergate called *Silent Coup: Removal of a President*, co-authored by Colodny and Robert Gettlin, a former *Washington Star* reporter, and published in April 1991 by St. Martin's Press. "Who are these guys?" I thought.

I was blown away by the book's revelations, the product of previously unpublished archival evidence and lengthy recorded interviews with key players, including Mitchell. I trekked to Tampa at Len's invitation, at once kind and transactional: To get my hands on the eighty hours of conversations he had recorded with Mitchell between 1985 and his death in 1988—invaluable to Mitchell's biographer—I needed to see all his stuff, Len told me.

"You can't write about Washington," he told me on that first trip, "when you're living in Washington." I like to think my own career in Washington since then has refuted that claim, which I always found suspect; but distance from the material, I also came to learn, does have its benefits, and Len's co-management of *Silent Coup* from Tampa, not the traditional media centers of New York or Washington, alerted me to that. He was an early fan of the Internet, moved swiftly to copyright Watergate.com and make his corpus accessible online; he was, in short, an early avatar of remote work.

As I write this, I am, at fifty-three, only one year younger than Len was when he met me at the airport. But at first sight he was already well advanced into the appearance—a fashion style, equal parts sartorial and attitudinal—that we might call Senior Floridian Jewish: short and bow-legged, his balding pate covered by a plastic-mesh baseball cap that rode the back of his head too high, mismatched shirt and shorts, white sneakers, white socks pulled up knee-length, the Love Boat docked at Puerto Vallarta...I was only twenty-three, terribly inexperienced, not long out of Johns Hopkins, but even I could tell my interlocutor did not look like your standard exposer of Watergate secrets, the Dashing Reporter or State-

Len Colodny	Fwd: Ehrlichman/Colodny 4/29/86 Excerpt 2	04/30/01
Len Colodny	Moorer To Haig (Moorer - Colodny Interview 1/27/87)	05/03/01
Len Colodny	Re: [Ehrlichman Version Of M-R]	07/17/01
Len Colodny	Fwd: Graham On "Deep Throat"	07/19/01
Len Colodny	Fwd: Woodward On Graham	07/23/01
Len Colodny	Bast On Colson's Knowledge Of Moorer/Radford Jan. 1990	07/26/01
Len Colodny	Bast/Colson	07/26/01
Len Colodny	Ehrlichman On Haig Involvement 9/18/90	07/31/01
Len Colodny	"Welander Reinterview"	07/31/01
Len Colodny	Re: ["Welander Reinterview"]	08/01/01
Len Colodny	Fwd: James My Interview With Walter Isaacson Jan 1991	08/17/01
Len Colodny	Radford's Accomplice Bowles	08/28/01
Len Colodny	Re: [Fwd: Dean Under Oath Gives Up His Book	05/15/02
Len Colodny	AP Story 5/7/02	05/22/02
Len Colodny	Fwd: Caulfield Says Dean Orders Casing Of DNC/ Interview 6/14/88/ Tape # 09	06/05/02
Len Colodny	Fwd: Ulasewicz Says Dean Ordered Him In To DNC/Interview 5/16/88/Tape # 3	06/05/02
Len Colodny	"Butterfield/Colodny Interview 3/26/87	10/22/02
Len Colodny	Hunt/Colodny Interview 1/16/91	01/01/03
Rosen, James	FW: Kalmbach/Colodny Interview 4/22/88	01/13/03
Rosen, James	FW: June 28th Meeting Dean,Mitchell et al (Colodny/Larue 5/9/89	01/13/03
Rosen, James	FW: Kalmbach/Colodny Interview 4/27/88	01/14/03
Len Colodny	Fwd: Strachan	03/17/03
Len Colodny	Colodny/Mardian Interview 6/13/89	03/17/03
Len Colodny	Peterson/Colodny Interview 6/7/88 (Not Sure On Date)	03/17/03
Len Colodny	RN,JNM and AC	03/20/03

A sampling of the Colodny-Rosen email history.

ly Historian…This was the first, and perhaps most important, lesson Len Colodny was to teach me: Looks can be deceiving, in people and literature.

"Len doesn't speak the king's English," a mutual associate would later remark, and that, too, was true. Len's approaches to conversation and interviewing were the same. His archive of recorded phone calls with historical figures—the Colodny Collection now housed at Texas A&M University—blurred the line between those two genres. To spend an hour or three on the phone with Len was to experience a powerful blend of analysis, argument, humor, profanity, purpose.

When, late at night, he indulged his beloved whiskey, his speech over the phone became thicker, his penchant for insinuation deepened, and his laugh, always a cackle, grew louder and longer. Once, in that state, when our talk turned to the Vietnam War and I said something ill-considered, he rebuked me angrily, reminded me that his friends came back in body bags. The riots, the assassinations, and the war, he would tell me. That's the key to everything.

I was further astonished by Len's working space. With his kids, John and Sherry, grown and out the door, Len was alone at his home in greater Tampa with his wife, Sandy. Petite and soft-spoken, Sandy never rolled her eyes at her husband or his obsessions, as many wives do; instead she made clear, at all points, that her faith in Leonard was total. If she ever doubted the wisdom or cost-benefit value of Leonard's crusades, resented their impact on the Colodnys, such confrontations were kept strictly private. Len's achievements were impossible without Sandy, and he rewarded her faith with his own fidelity. He never treated his wife, nor spoke of her, with anything less than old-school gallantry. Aside from their stockpiling of plastic containers from Chinese take-out—I once stumbled on a cabinet filled with them—they were a model couple.

Len's office was a small upstairs room, sunlit and overrun with papers and audio cassettes. This was still the era of fax machines, and it was immediately clear that Len's practice was to save every fax he had ever sent and received. Some of mine must be in that pile, I thought to myself…And the tapes! Hundreds of them! Poorly labeled, massive in number, stacked on top of each other precariously…I could spend the rest of my life here and never make my way through it all, I thought…

I had the same idea a few weeks ago, surveying for this article what came up in my old email system when I entered the search term "COLODNY." The emails! Hundreds of them! Stacked on top of each other! A random sampling of captions from 2001-03 captured the boundless scope of Len's interests in the Nixon era is pictured above.

I saved them all, in Colodnian practice, because

I regarded them all as important, worth slogging through, when time permitted. Of course, even seventeen years of work on Watergate could not provide time enough to pursue all of Len's leads, the bombshells he uncovered and the trails that led to culs-de-sac.

Still, the sheer mass of Colodnyana cluttering that tiny room was instantly recognizable to me as a feast for scholars and particularly to someone determined to tell the story, then untold, of the life and times of John Mitchell. One nugget alone, from May 1992, always stood in my mind as reflective of what-all Len was sitting on, now the property of the Colodny Collection at Texas A&M:

> COLODNY: Sy, I'm gonna tell you this one last time. Bob Woodward is an incredible liar.
>
> HERSH: I know.
>
> COLODNY: And, and—
>
> HERSH: It hurts me to believe that he's in my fucking profession—
>
> COLODNY: Well, no, we argued that point. He's not in your pro—you are a legitimate what, what I—
>
> HERSH: Whatever it is.

It took years, and another trip to Sand Key, before Len delivered unto me a stack of CD-ROMs featuring his collected conversations with John Mitchell. When I finally examined them, I was dismayed, as I know other researchers have been, by how much more COLODNY: there was than MITCHELL:...But the transcripts, prepared by a court stenographer as part of Len's ten-year todeskampf of litigation against John and Maureen Dean, were invaluable to my work on Mitchell and often proved, in conjunction with Len's and Bob Gettlin's interviews of other figures, revelatory. (It was in one of Bob's interviews that Mitchell revealed he had learned, during his years in power, that President Kennedy had smoked marijuana in the White House.)

One of the legacies of Silent Coup was its exoneration of Mitchell on various points of contention in Watergate: conclusions hard-fought, brilliantly proved, and historically significant, including—but not limited to—final authorization for the DNC operation, the Burning Tree escapade, and the smoking gun conversation.

But the Colodny Collection also preserved an important moment of self-incrimination by the former attorney general. In their call of April 13, 1987, Mitchell admitted to Len, for the only time on record, his complicity in the FBI wiretaps of National Security Council aides and newsmen from 1969-1971:

> COLODNY: It's either gonna be Kissinger, Haig, or Haldeman.... Because those taps were only authorized by those people. Or requested. I'm sorry; you authorized all of them. They, they requested them.
>
> MITCHELL: Gosh, Len, I, um—they, um—after those meetings they had—I'm talking about, ah, Nixon, Kissinger, Hoover, and so forth and so on—ah, they sort of came over and, as I recall, in a bunch. And they, ah—the way it was handled was that, uh Hoover would take and put together the back-up material, and, um, send it over to my office for consideration. And I'd look at it, with the background I had, [and] would authorize it.

After a dinner on that second trip, a relaxed meal with Sandy, their attorney Charlie Carlson, and others, Len inscribed my copy of *Silent Coup*. Oddly, he signed the title page twice, at top and bottom, and wrote in between, in his not-the-king's-English scrawl, a primitive mix of uppercase, lowercase, print, and cursive:

> To James Rosen
> Great friend and supporter
> And most of all the
> Protector of the History of
> Watergate + John Mitchell well into
> The next century, and beyond
> Good luck
> Warmest Personal Wishes
> Len Colodny
> Sand Key, FL
> 8/8/94

The twenty-first century seemed very far away that evening. I never imagined I was still fourteen years away from finishing The Strong Man.

8/8/94, of course, was the twentieth anniversary of Nixon's resignation. Watergate anniversaries were important events for us. On June 17, 1997, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the arrests, Len and I appeared alongside Jim Hougan—author of *Secret Agenda: Watergate, Deep Throat and the CIA* (1984), the Book of Genesis in Watergate revisionism, a major influence on us both—as guests on Gordon Liddy's radio program. The show was broadcast live, on WJFK-AM and C-SPAN, from the Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge

James Rosen's appeared on G. Gordon Liddy's radio show on June 17, 1997 to discuss The Strong Man. It was the 25th aniversary of the second break-in at the Watergate, and C-SPAN was on-site to cover the event.

that had served as the burglars' surveillance post. Len was in high spirits that day.

In the summer of 2003, when I was freshly engaged to Sara Durkin, now my wife, we stayed in Len and Sandy's beach condo for a week and dined with them at the Bonefish Grill. It rained miserably all week, so Sara and I drove to Disney World, where the monsoons continued and we treated ourselves to Victoria and Albert's. The following year, Sandy and Len were in attendance when Sara and I were married at The Army and Navy Club in Washington. My search for "COLODNY" emails brought up the photos Len took that day, from his low angle, as Sara and I walked down the aisle with our parents.

* * *

Bob Gettlin has already related in these pages ("Warrior For Truth," January 2022), lovingly and professionally, how Len became interested in Watergate, the winding path that took them to the *New York Times* bestseller list and a decade of bitter litigation. I will also leave to others the important work of assessing how *Silent Coup* has stood the test of time and the strict scrutiny applied in that litigation. Suffice to say that not one word of the book's text was ever retracted; to the contrary, between the two jury trials held in *Wells v. Liddy*, in both of which I testified, the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the "evidence" arrayed by the defense "tends to corroborate the call-girl theory generally." It was a rare stamp of approval by a judicial panel one rung below the Supreme Court on a revisionist theory the *Washington Post* dismissed as "wacko."

My more modest objective here is to evoke the man. The Rosen-Colodny email collection—the faxes are long gone—bring to life the driven mind I was privileged to engage for so long.

Though Len was an unreconstructed Sixties liberal—"Guess who gets my vote in November," he wrote me in 2004, "my first presidential vote in twenty [sic] years"—his overriding commitment was to history and the Constitution. He regarded Richard Nixon as a criminal president but still pursued, with obsessive energy, the evidence that showed the thirty-seventh president and his aides were misled at critical junctures, railroaded by the Watergate Special Prosecution Force, denied due process.

"I just had an initial phone conversation with Jill. This is very delicate to say the least," he wrote me in August 2003. Len was serving as an intermediary between John Mitchell's daughter, Jill Mitchell Reed, and me, after years of estrangement between us that I had inadvertently caused and which I needed, desperately, to be brought to an end. "There is a glimmer of hope....There is still more time needed to work with her."

Len's shuttle diplomacy did the trick: Jill allowed me to visit her in Florida, to spend hours interviewing her, and to take back to Washington, for scanning and return, her collection of family photos, a number of which appeared in *The Strong Man*.

By 2004, I was sending Len my uncut chapters for review and criticism. He supplied both in ample measure.

Of ROBBING THE PRESIDENT'S DESK, which focused on the Moorer-Radford affair, the Pentagon Papers, the formation of the Plumbers, and the infiltration of the group by CIA, Len wrote it "takes the story to another level beyond Hougan and raises serious questions about the relationship of the CIA at the highest level to the Nixon administration and later it's [sic] re-election campaign.

"Based on what you have written and the current research I have done for my next project"—this was a reference to what would become *The Forty Years War* (2009), co-authored with Tom Shachtman—"the CIA infiltration of the White House was operational, meaning they [sic] were carrying out jobs using the White House as a cover for operations they knew to be illegal[,] both domestic and foreign. It also appears in the end they were trying to undermine the President."

> You [have] to ask yourself, "what the hell is going here???" You take the reader to the waters edge, really teasing us trying to figure it all out. At the end you are left with the feeling that none of this in the context of the accepted version makes any sense at all. It seems Howard Baker's minority report may have been at the time the only evidence pointing in the right direction....You have done a great job taking us further up the mountain, now I am thinking will you be taking just a little more in that direction by book[']s end?
>
> Regards,
> Len

In November 2004, he commented on GEMSTONE, the chapter recounting the origins of the DNC operation.

"This really is an excellent piece of work....You have done a much more thorough job than I did with Dean. In the end it is sad to say, whether it is Magruder or Dean that is being tracked, G. Gordon Liddy could have changed the face of Watergate, and the fate of those like JNM, if he had only talked. His is the most accurate portrayal of the events...What a shame for history...Keep the good stuff coming."

The following year, he wrote to tell me he had seen "Jimmy Kimmel Live!" use a snippet of my on-air reporting in a skit ("You must have quite an agent"). He closed with mention of an important upcoming event, another visitor lured to Tampa: "I have Tom Shachtman coming down here in the first week in February to see if we can put the outline together for the book to follow *Silent Coup* and *Strongman* [sic]."

Len's encouragement mattered to me, not just because I aimed to make as significant a contribution to the literature of Watergate as he and Gettlin, and before them, Hougan, had done, but because we both knew I was the first researcher making systematic use of the Colodny Collection. "You have a unique opportunity through Mitchell to blend the best of *Secret Agenda* and the best of *Silent Coup*...and take this story to the next level," he wrote me, adding elsewhere: "You really are the textbook model of how the taped interview[s] should be used. I am impressed."

> There are really, really no heros [sic] in the Watergate saga and in many ways your book is starkly making that point. The enemies of *Secret Agenda* and *Silent Coup* will be out in force to challenge this reality as well. You have also given me some real insight as to why Mitchell was still looking for answers right up to the day of his death. Watergate is truly a house of cards built on a solid foundation of lies...Your book is certainly an important step in trying set the history correct. Yet we all have a long road of hidden truths to be followed and exposed. I think you can see this chapter really did get to me. Maybe it is not wise to get too close to one['s] subjects or maybe not??? After all we are all human.
>
> Regards,
> Len

After *The Strong Man* was finally published—with our first son a toddler and our second two years away—my contact with Len diminished. I regret not calling him more often to check in. When I faced difficult times—the kind when you learn who your real

friends are—he wrote immediately to tell me he was there for me. THAT is something LC would have done.

At Sherry's request, I joined the advisory board of the Colodny Collection and gave my best counsel when asked. I'm not sure how useful it was. When Len sent me the draft for the book proposal for *The Forty Years War*, I found it difficult to follow, riddled with typos. I wondered whether to be honest with him about this. I finally decided that honesty, and fearlessness, were what Len was all about, and that he would demand nothing less. So I sent him a long email outlining why he and Shachtman should absolutely not send this proposal to any publishers, not without significant revision; Len wrote back to tell me HarperCollins had already purchased the book.

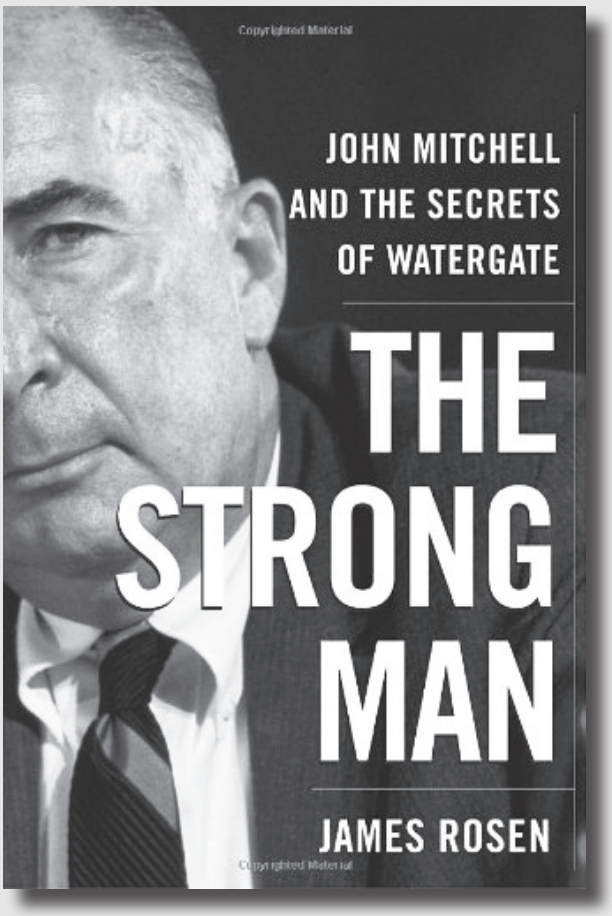
When Len had his stroke, I called down to Florida and again heard, for the first time in too long, Sandy's soft, brittle voice. She assured me her husband, Len the Battler, the tough little character who had taken on the *Washington Post*, "60 Minutes," the Deans, and other powerful forces, was going to prevail. He did, for a while.

The last time we spoke was in April 2021, three months before his death. I called Len from a parking lot in Oxon Hill, Maryland: site of the funeral for Gordon Liddy. For the open casket viewing, I was soon to meet up with Hougan and John B. Williams, Liddy's stalwart lawyer in the Wells litigation. Len's speech on that last call was occluded; but the old spark was still there. He remained focused on the Nixon-Dean conversations of March 1973. We told each other we loved each other.

For the readers of *garrison*, it is perhaps fitting to close with one of the last Rosen-Colodny email exchanges. In May 2018 he wrote to notify me that S.T. Patrick of the "Midnight Writer News Show" had contacted him to ask if Len would in turn contact me about my possible participation in "a Mitchell show."

"Thanks Len," I wrote. "What do you know about this person and the show?" "I have done his show twice and they were both good shows," he wrote back. He added that Ray Locker—author of *Nixon's Gamble* (2015) and *Haig's Coup* (2019), another younger writer nurtured by Len over the years—had also appeared on Patrick's program and enjoyed it. "I think he is quite good." ★

James Rosen is the chief White House correspondent for Newsmax. He is currently at work on a two-volume biography of Antonin Scalia, the first volume of which will be published in 2023 by Regnery. He is on Twitter @JamesRosenTV



"James Rosen has brought us a fascinating and provocative account of John Mitchell's life. Using fresh and unexpected sources, *The Strong Man* dispels some of the mysteries that still linger around this central figure of the Nixon administration and Watergate. Rosen has achieved the difficult task of showing us heretofore unseen facets of the subculture that led to the greatest scandal in American history."

—MICHAEL BESCHLOSS

"Rosen has captured the players in Watergate as if he were on duty at the White House during the scandal. It is a tragic story that reads like a novel. The most accurate book on Watergate and the president's men—and the president—yet to be published."

—DWIGHT L. CHAPIN
SPECIAL ASSISTANT TO NIXON

AVAILABLE WHERE ALL BOOKS ARE SOLD