

News Watch

Time for TV To Reappraise Watergate?

By Kevin Phillips



You might have expected that on June 17, 1977, the fifth anniversary of that famous burglary, the network news programs would have one last commemorative Watergate wallow—and so they did. Once again, though, their greatest failing was less what they said than what they chose not to discuss.

Take the *CBS Evening News*. Lesley Stahl, one of the screen's more perceptive correspondents, observed that the American people may never know what brought Watergate about.

Maybe not. But this is one facet of the 5-year-old affair that has been insufficiently analyzed. And in the end, the evidence of "why" and "for what" may be central in judging whether the media (not least TV news) performed a public service or a political execution in their Watergate coverage. Seriously.

Why did Watergate happen? What brought it about? The answers are not totally elusive. Since the Nixon-Frost interviews, moreover, new information has surfaced (or gained circulation). All of the material I cite can be found in books and newspapers available to the public (or to a TV news director).

A month and a half ago, for example, convicted Watergate burglar E. Howard Hunt was quoted by the *Chicago Tribune*, maintaining that the break-in was staged to find suspected financial ties between the Cuban Communist regime and Sen. George McGovern's Presidential bid.

Or ask convicted burglar Eugenio

Martinez. "I had hopes," he has said, "we might have done something valuable [in burglarizing Democratic headquarters]. We all heard rumors in Miami that McGovern was receiving money from Castro. That was nothing new. We believe that today."

Or convicted burglar Frank Sturgis. Back in 1974, he told reporter Andrew St. George that the Watergate burglary team had been told to look for (1) any dirt on prominent Democrats; (2) "anything on Howard Hughes"; and (3) a "thick, secret memorandum from the Castro government" consisting of a "long, detailed listing" of CIA and DIA (Defense Intelligence Agency) covert operations against Cuba, plus a Cuban analysis of how the CIA had not told the whole truth about these operations even to U.S. Government leaders.

Add it up. Taken together, these statements suggest that the break-in was aimed, rightly or wrongly, at procuring assassination-plot material and establishing informational or financial ties between the 1972 Democratic campaign and Castro's Cuba. What's more, a second alleged motivation—getting "anything on Howard Hughes"—ties right in. Remember that according to 1975 testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee, Hughes was involved with the CIA-Mafia conspiracies against Castro. There was even discussion of his Hughes Tool Company serving as a Latin American front for the CIA! So material on →

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Hughes could easily have related to Cuba or the CIA plots.

A second point: Who were the *only two people* at the Democratic National Committee whose phones were tapped? Answer: Chairman Larry O'Brien (who for some time during 1971 had been receiving a monthly retainer from Howard Hughes even while serving as DNC chairman) and middle-level official R. Spencer Oliver (whose father, one Robert Oliver, just happened to be an account executive on the Hughes Tool account at R. Mullen and Company, a public-relations-firm-cum-CIA-front).

Big coincidence, huh? Again we see three intermingled strands: Cuba, Howard Hughes, the CIA.

Let's set aside the theme of Cuban money (although it is a bit of a coincidence that George McGovern is such a friend of Fidel Castro and that one of McGovern's ex-press aides, Kirby Jones by name, is the go-between for U.S. corporations out to do business in Cuba). But the Castro-plots-Hughes-CIA link cannot be dismissed.

Were the Watergate burglars looking for Cuba-Hughes-assassination-plot material that could have embarrassed the CIA? Maybe so. John Ehrlichman drops hints in his novel "The Company." And after the first Nixon-Frost show, burglar Frank Sturgis told a WFAA-TV (Dallas) interviewer that the CIA hatched the break-in because they felt the President was becoming too powerful and was too interested in the assassination of John Kennedy.

Who knows? But other Nixon aides and allies have also queried the role of the CIA. Team-leader Howard Hunt, himself an ex-CIA man, discussed the possibility in May that burglar James McCord might have been part of a conspiracy to trap the Watergate burglars. A minority Watergate report by Sen. Howard Baker, which the Ervin Committee refused to publish, flatly charged that when burglar James McCord was apprehended, a CIA agent named Pennington came to McCord's house and

"destroyed documents which might show a link between McCord and the CIA." Frank Sturgis says that Robert Bennett, president of the CIA-fronting Mullen Company, was the "Deep Throat" who fed information to The Washington Post. Yet Nixon White House aide Chuck Colson is also quoted by Jack Anderson, saying he had "good reason to believe that Bob Bennett was somehow involved in the decision to go after O'Brien." And Bennett was also a post-break-in liaison between Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy. A setup, maybe? Keep going . . . Top Nixon White House aide H.R. Halde- man, when asked if White House aide Alex Butterfield (who disclosed the White House taping system) was a CIA agent, said, "Maybe. I just don't know." (Sturgis implies Butterfield was.) Halde- man doesn't "dismiss" the possibility that the CIA was out to get Nixon; nei- ther does Ehrlichman. And New York investigator A.J. Woolston-Smith, a one-time CIA associate, has sworn an affidavit describing an April 1972 meet- ing at which Democratic officials dis- cussed Woolston-Smith's warning of Republican Watergate break-in plans. James McCord's name was mentioned (note here that Howard Hunt maintains that McCord fouled up the burglary, and that the police, somehow tipped, were waiting).

No, right now the American people don't know why the Watergate burglary (and consequent Presidential over- throw) took place. I'll bet most of them would like to know, though. Little of the information listed here has been drawn together by newsmen—print or video. But it would make quite a documenta- ry: "The 'Why' of Watergate—Was It a Setup or Was It a Blunder?"

CBS did a good job on June 10 with its two-hour special "The CIA's Secret Army." Let me suggest, however, that a two-hour special on the ever-unraveling whats and whys of Watergate could be a greater public service—and perhaps even begin straightening out the record of history. (END)