Sens. Abourezk and Kennedy [illegible]

The Rosenbergs' Last Days

1953 Memo Suggested Use of Psychiatrist to Win Confession

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By William Chapman

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In 1953, while convicted atom spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were fighting legal battles to avoid the electric chair, a top White House aide was hatching a novel plan to pry from them a confession of guilt.

"Cracking the Rosenbergs is not a 'third-degree' problem, but a psychiatric problem," presidential assistant Charles D. ("C.D.") Jackson thought. It would be a good idea, he suggested, to have a "really skillful Jewish psychiatrist . . . [illegible] to insinuate himself into their confidence. [illegible]

If the Rosenbergs [illegible] cooperative with the psychiatrist, Jackson went on, "a stay of execution for [illegible] 30 or 60 days could be [illegible] while the work [illegible]"

Jackson, who was President Eisenhower's administrative assistant, sketched out his plan in a memo to Attorney General Herbert Brownell.

He assured Brownell that pity for convicted spies wasn't his motive. "I am sure you understand that my interest is not in saving the Rosenbergs," Jackson wrote. "They deserve to fry a hundred times for what they have done to this country. But — if they can be cracked, what they can tell us may save the lives of hundreds of Americans later."

The incident is one of thousands of inside-the-government scenes from the last agonizing days of the Rosenberg case which emerge from Justice Department files made public in recent weeks.

They portray a government [illegible] out, and, most of all, hopeful of a last-minute confession from the Rosenbergs.

The Rosenbergs had been convicted in April, 1951, of conspiring to steal atomic bomb secrets for the Soviet Union. [illegible] series of appeals and [illegible] until June 19, 1953, the couple was electrocuted at New York's Sing Sing prison.

[illegible] Brownell considered it [illegible] advice of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover.

[illegible] propaganda would probably [illegible] the line that the government was attempting to coerce the Rosenbergs into making false confessions," he wrote.

Hoover also objected because the psychiatrist recommended by the White House aide was none other than the one used in the defense of Alger Hiss for purposes of discrediting Whittaker Chambers' testimony in another celebrated Communist trial of the period.

The psychiatrist Jackson referred to apparently was Dr. Carl A. Binger of Cambridge, Mass. He could not be reached for comment yesterday.

Nothing in the documents indicates that Binger was ever approached with Jackson's suggestion that he attempt to gain the Rosenbergs' confidence.

[illegible] days before the Rosenberg execution, a rumor swept the government that its star witness was [illegible] David Greenglass, Ethel Rosenberg's brother [illegible] in the atomic conspiracy [illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible] to agree.

Throughout the final months, the memos and letters indicate the government hoped daily for a [illegible] confession from the Rosenbergs that would reveal information that would help in the prosecution of at least three other espionage cases.

Late in 1952, as the Rosenbergs' first execution date approached, the Justice Department concocted a plan (which may never have been implemented) to have a representative stand by in Sing Sing prison. He was to stay there, recommended William E. Foley, chief of the Internal Security Section, ". . . in the event the Rosenbergs decide to confess in the hope of obtaining a commutation of sentence from the President."

The Rosenbergs' final appeal to President Eisenhower [illegible] was denied [illegible] they were [illegible] the [illegible] an extraordinary summer session to [illegible] last legal [illegible]

The day [illegible], on June 17, [illegible] Attorney General Brownell had advised the President [illegible] blunt language, that clemency [illegible]

[illegible] of the guilt of these [illegible] for a [illegible] proportions, [illegible] of our country and its people, is [illegible]

[illegible] center of a conspiratorial espionage [illegible] this country's [illegible] into [illegible]

Nearly [illegible] weeks after the executions at Sing Sing, the government was to receive another bit of reassurance from an unexpected source — Tessie Greenglass, the mother of David Greenglass and Ethel Rosenberg.

The FBI went to interview Mrs. Greenglass on Aug. 27, according to a memo in the files just released. The memo reports that on that date she told FBI agent John Harrington "that she did not attend the funeral of her daughter and son-in-law, and that she believed that her daughter, Ethel Rosenberg, was guilty and a soldier of Stalin."

report was talking about