

WASHINGTON — Ex-President Richard Nixon's infamous plumbers, so named because of their efforts to plug White House news leaks, wound up their nefarious works with an investigation of congressional leaks.

Their purpose was to embarrass Nixon's detractors by portraying them as security risks. Instead, the plumbers found Washington so porous that they couldn't sort out all of the leaks. It was "difficult to prove," reported one of their investigators, that any given "leak came from the Hill."

The plumbers' secret findings have a special significance today in light of all the excitement on Capitol Hill over leaks. The House Ethics Committee, suddenly more concerned about leaks than ethics, has invested \$150,000 to find out who leaked a House report to CBS newsman Dan Schorr.

Earlier, the committee stopped short of condemning Rep. Michael Harrington, D-Mass., for an alleged leak. And now the Justice Department is investigating Rep. Robert Leggett, D-Calif., for allegedly leaking classified information to the South Koreans.

All this has got investigators chasing in dizzying circles. For Washington is a Yellowstone of leaks, bubbling here, spouting there, spraying out suppressed information.

The White House plumbers discovered three years ago that government information channels would spring leaks faster than anyone could plug them. The plumbers started out to investigate the leaks on Capitol Hill. Chief plumber David Young sought the help of the Pentagon. He contacted Fred Buzhardt, then the Defense Department's general counsel, who assigned Pentagon investigator W. Donald Stewart to ferret out the security risks in Congress.

Stewart reported back on Feb. 13, 1973, that Capitol Hill was a sieve but that many of the leaks originated in the downtown government agencies, including the Pentagon and the White House.

On the Hill, he found classified documents stored in ordinary cabinets, transmitted without the regulation double envelopes and scattered around offices for any visitor to see.

The Secretary of Defense hasn't given adequate instructions, Stewart suggested, "detailing what can be given or cannot be given to members of Congress or the procedures for transmitting classified documents."

No central index was kept at the Pentagon, he added, to show what classified information had been distributed to congressional offices. As a result, the military brass had no idea what classified data was loose on the Hill.

Stewart found that government agencies often shower congressmen with classified information they don't want. "Many situations arise," he reported,

"where members of Congress desire to 'dump' unwanted classified material on military liaison officers on Capitol Hill."

In a lengthy memo, Stewart cited a number of lax security practices in Senate offices. But invariably, he found that leaks had their beginning in the State Department, Defense Department or White House.

For example, he investigated a New York Times leak on July 23, 1971, about the arms limitations talks. He reported that the New York Times correspondent, William Beecher, had been referred by a State Department source to the office of Senator Henry Jackson, D-Wash.

The FBI, joining in the probe, spoke to two of the senator's employees. They admitted discussing the subject with Beecher but denied revealing the classified details.

Observed Stewart: "Circumstantial evidence would tend to point the finger at Sen. Jackson, as we had learned that a State Department briefing was held in his office on subject matter with him prior to the publication." But there was no proof.

Stewart also suspected that the Senate Foreign Relations Committee had leaked information to reporters about U.S. bases in Spain. But before he could question the suspects, he was headed off by William Macomber, then an Assistant Secretary of State.

According to Stewart's memo, Macomber declared emphatically that then-Foreign Relations Chairman William Fulbright, D-Ark., "would not look favorably on such interviews." The investigation was halted in its tracks.

Stewart also failed to establish that his leading subject, Sen. William Proxmire, D-Wis., leaked stories to the press about the spiraling costs of producing the Air Force C-5A transport plane.

But Stewart learned that the information came from some confidential charts that had been slipped to Proxmire by a person identified only as "hostile toward the Air Force."

Of course, the government uses the classification system to censor embarrassing news, which officials don't want the people to read. The government has the authority to classify embarrassing facts, the ability to shut off channels of information and the power to intimidate sources who could tell the truth.

All these are on the side of the government. Often leaks are necessary to expose corruption and wrongdoing, waste and inefficiency, mismanagement and miscalculations.

Footnote: Spokesmen for Sens. Jackson and Proxmire and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee denied any knowledge of improper leaks.

Jack Anderson's

FPost 8/11/76

Washington Merry-go-round

BY JACK ANDERSON
With Les Whitten