

Was Nixon Framed?

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By Richard Raznikov

James McCord walked casually through the front main doors of the Watergate complex, signed in and rode the elevator to the eighth floor. Once there, he began to work, methodically taping open the locks on the doors, floor by floor, finally emerging in the sub-level basement garage. It was a warm June evening in Washington. In a matter of hours it would become considerably warmer for McCord and four others: plainclothes policemen arrested them on the sixth floor as they were engaged in burglarizing the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee (DNC).

Fifteen months later, the President of the United States resigned his office in the midst of impeachment proceedings. There is no doubt that had Richard Nixon not resigned, he would have been impeached and convicted by Congress. The process which began with the Senate hearings and ended with the hearings of the House Committee on the Judiciary has been praised by virtually everyone as demonstrating that "the American system works." Yet, there is reason to doubt that justice has been done, and there is substantial and compelling evidence that the real Watergate story has not been told.

It is true, of course, that Nixon and his staff moved quickly to obscure their involvement in the Watergate burglary and other sordid adventures. The infamous White House tapes prove this: perjury, pressure, payoffs, thinly veiled hints at "executive clemency." But there are strong indications that Nixon was a victim of something more sinister than his own neurotic obsession with obtaining political "intelligence." Throughout this entire case there are clear traces, threads of a far uglier conspiracy than that woven by Richard Nixon.

The men arrested at the DNC in the early morning hours of June 17 were well-known in some Washington circles. James McCord, ostensibly the leader of the group, was chief of security for Nixon's re-election campaign. The others — Bernard Barker, Eugenio Martinez, Virgilio Gonzalez and Frank Sturgis — were long-time CIA employees, Cuban exiles, and veterans of the 1961 Bay of Pigs disaster. Sturgis, a friend of Washington columnist Jack Anderson, has been implicated in the conspiracy to kill John Kennedy (see "From Dallas to Watergate," *Pacific Sun*, February 28, 1974).

These men were in possession of keys to rooms in the Watergate Hotel, where police found evidence linking two others to the burglary: Gordon Liddy, chief counsel for the Committee to Re-elect the President (CRP), and E. Howard Hunt, whose White House office and phone number turned up in Barker's clothes and in Martinez' address book.

Officials of the CRP denied any connection with the burglars. McCord, Sturgis and the rest had been "acting on their own," or under orders from somebody else. No one was able to explain why Barker and Martinez had Hunt's phone number, but Hunt wasn't talking. And no one seemed able to explain why Hunt had a White House office, but it was said that he had been hired by or through Chuck Colson.

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It must have required remarkable restraint on the part of the police not to blow the whole case open immediately. This was not, on the surface, much of a mystery. The burglars were likely a part of some kind of larger operation because, when apprehended, they had in their possession not only first-rate equipment but sequentially numbered hundred dollar bills as well.

In addition, room keys in their pockets led police to a veritable treasure-trove of evidence: address books with White House phone numbers, identifiable CIA-forged documents, and more money. Even if Nixon's desperate attempts to derail the inquiry into the actual source of the money had succeeded, it was easy to trace it to Barker's Miami bank account; and with that information it would take about five minutes to realize that Barker didn't have an income sufficient to account for it. To those with eyes to see it, the handwriting was on the wall as soon as the burglars were caught — and it spelled White House.

The President's press secretary called it a "third-rate burglary," but was it? When Nixon finally went belly-up, a lot of people who might be expected to know better ascribed his tumble to arrogance and stupidity. Wasn't his re-election assured without having to resort to such childish stuff? Was there that much to find at the DNC that it justified such a risk? How could these geniuses have been so witless as to utilize for the operation men like Hunt and McCord, who had such close connections to the administration? Good questions, for which we deserve better answers than Nixon's alleged "stupidity" or paranoia. A closer look at the actual facts of the Watergate break-ins, and the other known and suspected "plumbers" operations, suggests that there is far more to Watergate than most of us yet know.

E. Howard Hunt remains a mystery man. A career CIA agent, Hunt had several times "retired" from "the Company." But Hunt never retired. At the time of the Watergate break-in, he was working not only at the White House but also at Robert Mullen and

Company, the Washington public relations firm which has long been a front for CIA. It is unclear why the White House hired Hunt in the first place, but there is evidence concerning why he was hired at Mullen. According to a still-classified 25-page memorandum written by Eric W. Eisenstadt, chief of the Central Cover Staff of CIA's Clandestine Directorate, Robert Mullen had complained that former CIA Director Richard Helms "twisted my arm" to hire Hunt. Helms, or CIA, must have wanted badly to place Hunt with Mullen.

During the CIA's Bay of Pigs operation, Hunt was the "action officer," the liaison between the Company and the Cuban exiles. In that capacity he worked with Barker, Sturgis, and the others, who knew him as "Eduardo," and who trusted him with a child-like faith. They were unaware that Hunt was double-crossing them for the CIA in much the same way as CIA was double-crossing President Kennedy (again, see "From Dallas to Watergate"). Kennedy soon discovered the truth, and threatened to "break the CIA into a thousand pieces and scatter it to the winds," but the Cubans never realized their betrayal. They were still available for clandestine operations when Hunt began to recruit them in April of 1971.

A great deal can be learned about this entire affair through careful examination of an article written by Martinez for *Harper's Magazine*.

After Hunt's initial contact, Martinez told his CIA Case Officer (superior) that Eduardo was back in town. Normally, the CO would draw from him every possible detail about the movements and activities of other agents, but this time he seemed to show no interest, something Martinez regarded as "strange." Then, in July of 1971, Martinez' friend Barker received a letter from Hunt on White House stationery, saying that he now worked for the President:

"So I went back to my CO and said to him, 'Hey, Eduardo is still in contact with us, and now he is counselor of the President.'"

"A few days later my CO told me that the Company had no information on Eduardo except that he was not working in the White House. Well, imagine! I knew Eduardo was in the White House. What it meant to me was that Eduardo was above them and either they weren't supposed to know what he was doing or they didn't want me to talk about him anymore. Knowing how these people act, I knew I had to be careful . . ."

Soon after this episode, Hunt recruited Martinez, Barker, and another exile, Felipe de Diego, for a "national security job," involving a "traitor." This was to be the burglary of the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist, Dr Lewis Fielding, in Los Angeles. The men flew into L.A. and met Hunt for a "briefing." Martinez expressed his puzzlement:

"The briefing was not like anything I was used to in the Company. Ordinarily, before an operation, you have a briefing and then you train for the operation. You try to find a place that looks similar and you train in disguise and with the code you are going to use. You try out the plan many times so that later you have the elasticity to abort the operation if the conditions

are not ideal.

"Eduardo's briefing was not like this. There wasn't a written plan, not even any mention of what to do if something went wrong. There was just the man talking about the thing."

As it turned out, the burglars found nothing in Fielding's office related to Ellsberg, a "dry hole," as Nixon is heard describing it on the tapes — and they were extremely lucky in not being caught. They had been given a length of rope to bail out of the window if something went wrong, but the rope turned out to be so short and insubstantial that they'd have broken their necks in the fall.

Meanwhile, Hunt was supposed to be keeping an eye on Fielding, to alert the men if the doctor suddenly returned to his office — but Hunt has "lost" Fielding. Everything seemed to go wrong: the glass cutter given to Martinez couldn't cut the glass, and the men had had to use other means of gaining entrance.

Feeling that they had failed, Martinez, Barker and De Diego rejoined Hunt at the hotel. They were depressed, but not Eduardo. "Well done," said Hunt, opening a bottle of champagne, "this is a celebration. You deserve it." It all seemed surreal to Martinez, the veteran, because "no one invites you to have champagne and is happy when you fail . . . The whole thing was strange, but Eduardo was happy so we were happy."

An unusual operation, to say the least: aimed at a dry hole, of dubious value in the first place, without proper planning or equipment. All this from E. Howard Hunt, master spy of the CIA. And champagne to celebrate the failure of a mission. Strange indeed. And, to top it off, we have Martinez' startling admission:

"According to the police, we were using gloves and didn't leave any fingerprints. But I'm afraid that I did because I didn't wear my gloves . . . I went through the offices with my bare hands . . ."

Back in Miami, Martinez again notified his CO of Hunt's activities. He was immediately contacted by CIA's Chief of the Western Hemisphere, who expressed interest in Hunt's movements and asked Martinez to prepare a report, in his own hand, in Spanish, about Hunt. He was to turn the report over to his CO in a sealed envelope. Instead, Martinez wrote a "cover story." He did not want any trouble with the CIA over his part in Hunt's activities.

In May of 1972, Hunt again contacted Barker and Martinez. There was to be another operation, this time in Washington. Barker was given nearly \$100,000, evidence that Eduardo was working on some very big plans.

Once in Washington, the Cubans were told that there was money flowing into the McGovern campaign from Fidel Castro. They were to burglarize McGovern's Washington headquarters to get the proof. It must be said that for many years Cuban exiles have been performing dangerous missions for CIA, deceived into the belief that they were striking blows toward liberation for their homeland. The use of people in this way by an agency of our government remains one of the more disgusting aspects of the entire affair.

The target then shifted. Hunt now had evidence, he said, that proof of the Castro connection was to be found in the DNC offices at Watergate. After two or three false starts, each time without any operational or contingency plans, the team finally broke into DNC headquarters.

One of these false starts is worth mentioning. On this occasion, after succeeding in obtaining entrance to the building and getting to the sixth floor, Gonzalez, the locksmith, was unable to open the last door. Furious, Hunt ordered Gonzalez back to Miami for more tools. But Martinez, too, was furious — with Hunt:

"I . . . told Barker I resented the way they were treating Gonzalez . . . I said there wasn't adequate operational preparation. There was no floor plan of the building; no one knew the disposition of the elevators, how many guards there were, or even what time the guards checked the building. Gonzalez did not know what kind of door he was supposed to open. There weren't even any contingency plans . . ."

"Barker came back with a message from Eduardo: 'You are an operative. Your mission is to do what you



The quintet arrested burglarizing DNC June 17, 1972, left to right from top: James McCord, Bernard Barker, Eugenio Martinez, Frank Sturgis, Virgilio Gonzalez.

are told and not to ask questions."

If these operations were hazardous, Martinez would know: the Senate Watergate Committee, in secret testimony, learned of more than 300 burglaries in which he had participated as an agent for CIA. Nor can it be said that Hunt, a master spy for the Company, was ignorant of the need for adequate preparation. Yet, nothing changed. Back from Miami with more equipment, Gonzalez managed to open the door to the DNC: the team took thirty pictures and McCord placed taps on two phones.

Back in Miami, Hunt gave Barker a roll of film to be developed. The latter had no idea what the film contained, and took it to a commercial shop. Hunt again became furious: the film was from the break-in. The prints would show documents being held by gloved hands. Barker rushed back to the shop to pay for the prints, and tried to bribe the proprietor — who later went to the F.B.I. It made no sense for Hunt to give this film to Barker for processing. He could have had the job done himself instead of trusting to Barker, a man not celebrated for his mental agility; he at least could have told Barker of the film's contents, thus insuring that it would be kept out of the wrong hands. Instead, Hunt acted unwisely, taking another risk.

By now Hunt was in an ideal position to know that the break-ins were producing nothing of value. Yet he persisted, tossing every routine CIA precaution out the window. Was he preparing to throw the operatives out of the window as well? Martinez was beginning to smell something funny. Too much danger, too many unexplained lapses in planning and security. He wanted out. But, as with the Mafia, one does not withdraw easily from CIA activities:

"When you are in this kind of business, and you are in the middle of something, it is not easy to stop. Everyone will feel that you might jeopardize the operation. 'What to do with this guy now?' I knew it would create a big problem . . ." So Martinez agreed to go on one last mission. It turned out to be everybody's last mission.

For the second DNC break-in, Hunt told the operatives to buy forty rolls of film with thirty-six exposures per roll — he expected them to take 1440 photos, a clear impossibility. Arriving at the Watergate, the men were briefed by Hunt. He told them to leave their identification and valuables in a briefcase, which he left in the room. He told them to keep their room keys, an incredible "error" since it would lead police directly to the briefcase. Then he gave them each two crisp one hundred dollar bills, sequentially numbered. He told them to use the money to bribe anyone who caught them.

It is impossible for any sane person to believe that the hundred dollar bills represented a reasonable contingency plan, or that in the event of arrest these men would be able to buy their way out. Moreover, for Hunt to have instructed the burglars to keep their room keys, when these keys would lead police immediately to proof of their identities and White House connections, is so incredibly stupid that it could not have been a mistake. Hunt's actions as the Plumbers' operations officer gives rise to the inescapable inference that the burglaries were not supposed to succeed.

Virtually every material aspect of these break-ins ran contrary to established CIA procedures: poor equipment, lack of prior planning, run-through, or contingency, taking absurd and wholly unnecessary risks, leaving clear trails, and failure to take even minimal precautions against discovery. These were not omissions due to inexperience or carelessness, for Hunt and McCord were experts. The failure at the Watergate was purposeful.

The behavior of James McCord throughout the Watergate affair also invites suspicion. His White House connection was not as direct as Hunt's, but he was, in fact, the chief of security for the Committee to Re-elect the President. His capture inside the DNC is unforgivable from a strategic viewpoint because he should never have been anywhere near the actual point of crime. What, then, was he doing there?

McCord, a CIA employee for 21 years, had, through his intelligence and capacity, risen to the post of chief of security for CIA's headquarters in Langley, Virginia. Chief of security for the CIA! His assignment there involved maximum trust. To say the least, he was not a bungler.

But it was James McCord who taped open the locks at the Watergate in such a manner that the tape was visible from the outside. It was McCord who, when the tape was found and removed by a building guard, replaced the tape — again so "carelessly" that its inevitable discovery led directly to capture for the burglars. Obviously, tape can be placed over a lock vertically, so that when a door is closed the tape cannot be seen. Had this been done, even Hunt's continual mistakes might not have brought such immediate arrest. We might reasonably ask, what could have possessed McCord to commit such a monumental error — twice in the same evening? The answer will not come easily, but Eugenio Martinez noticed something that might be mentioned:

"I don't believe it has ever been told before, but all the time we were working on the door, McCord would be going to the eighth floor. It is still a mystery to me what he was doing there. At 2 a.m. I went up to tell him about our problems, and there I saw him talking to two guards. What happened? I thought, have we been caught? No, he knew the guards. So I did not ask questions . . ."

But there are questions, disturbing questions. A President has been driven out of office in the wake of an investigation into the Watergate affair. When that investigation seemed stalled, it was a letter from James McCord to Judge John Sirica which renewed it. When it stalled again, it was the persistence of the Post's reporters, Woodward and Bernstein, materially aided by a secret source they named "Deep Throat," which invigorated it. Who was "Deep Throat," and for whom was he working? Why did McCord misplace the tape, or write his letter to Sirica? Why did Hunt seemingly fail so badly? Was Hunt working for someone other than the President of the United States?

This is the first article of a series.