

The Rosenbergs' Last Days

1953 Memo Suggested Use of Psychiatrist to Win Confession

By William C. Sullivan
Washington Post Staff Writer

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" . . . to insinuate himself into their confidence.

If the Rosenbergs were cooperative with the psychiatrist, Jackson went on, a stay of execution for either 30 or 60 days could be arranged while the work proceeded.

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 report was talking about this . . .

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. A series of appeals and stays of execution followed. But on June 19, 1953, the couple was executed at New York's Sing Sing prison.

The idea of a psychiatric approach was first suggested by a Jewish psychiatrist, Dr. Edgar Hoover. Brownell considered it seriously, and in the advice of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover.

Hoover and Jackson talked it over. Hoover pointed out it would be a "psychiatric" approach. "This procedure would probably take 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 side 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. Bluger of Cambridge, Mass. He could not be reached for comment yesterday.

Nothing in the documents indicates that Bluger was ever approached with Jackson's

suggestion that he attempt to gain the Rosenbergs' confession.

Four days after the Rosenberg execution, a rumor about the government that its star witness was cracking. David Greenglass, Ethel Rosenberg's brother and the chief government witness in the atomic spy case, had been approached by a psychiatrist.

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Throughout the last months, the cables and letters indicate, the government hoped daily for a confession from the Rosenbergs that would remove the foundation that would stand 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 ap-

peal to President Eisenhower or Attorney General was denied in 1953. They were executed on June 19, 1953, the day the Rosenbergs' appeal was denied. It was an extraordinary summer season in the White House last year.

The day before, on June 17, 1953, Attorney General Brownell had ordered the Rosenberg case to be handled by a special emergency administrative board.

The purpose of the guilt of these prisoners for a crime of national proportions, affecting the safety of our country and the people, is to be determined. The board is to report to the President on the results of its trial.

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Early in 1953, after the execution of the Rosenbergs, the government was to receive another bit of reassurance from an unexpected source — Tessa 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 Harrison "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 member of Stalin."