The Cold War Comes Home

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It has always been the statutory cornerstone and the hard-rock fundament of the national-security bureaucracy's power that it was the President's only source of intelligence information. Other government departments could put in their occasional trouvailles, but they could do so only through the channels of the "intelligence community" presided over by the CIA. Now this vital monopoly, this lifeline was being shredded. It isn't easy to render a condign description, a graphic reprise of the surprise, anger, and panic that convulsed the espionage establishment when it discovered that the White House was putting operatives in the field.

It was the beginning. Three years were to pass before the first burglary arrests at Watergate, then sixteen months of headlines and hearings, a great many mean things made public, and yet this opening chord, this first electric alarm of the great crisis somehow remained muffled, insulated, giving those who knew about it the odd sensation that when Watergate finally did begin to emerge into public view, it did so backward.

And yet, the espionage establishment need not have despaired. Post equitem sedet atra cura. Watergate was etched subliminally beneath the very first instructions Ehrlichman and Colson issued to their agents. The fated curse of technicist bureaucracy overtook the new White House spymasters with the endemic rapidity of tropical spirochetes engulfing a Norwegian ship's crew.

Their intelligence operations quickly became intragovernmental, that is, mutually competitive. By the end of 1970, every first-rank Nixon aide had to have his own spy shop, or at least be a partner in one. They internalized their intelligence activities with headlong speed. They technified senselessly—charts, graphs, bugs, concealed cameras, dart guns, phone taps, the most expensive monitoring equipment ever to appear on any agent's expense voucher, where a single inside source and a few intelligent questions would have been enough. They began to bureaucratize even while they were a handful, by constructing their own model of reality and falling under its artificial, self-generated norms. Their failure to perceive other models of reality led them into the usual errors. Certainly they underestimated both the bitterness and the subtlety of the CIA hierarchies, and it is conceivable that the CIA arranged for a trap at the Watergate.

On the morning of June 17, 1972, the watch officer at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, woke director Richard Helms a little after seven to tell him about the arrest of "the White House crew," for that was how the intelligence professionals had come to think of the agents hired by John Mitchell and John Ehrlichman and the other Nixon aides. Both the CIA and the FBI had long known, of course, about the existence of the Hunt-Liddy team. The CIA had infiltrated it with a confidential informant, just as if Hunt and Liddy had been foreign diplomats, and the informant, an old Company operative named Eugenio Martinez, code-named "Rolando," who had reported in advance on the break-in. "Ah, well," Helms said, "They finally did it." He chatted for a few moments with the young watch officer, who said it was "a pity about McCord and some of those guys." "Well, yes," Helms said. "A pity about the President, too, you know. They really blew it. The sad thing is, we all think 'That's the end of it.' and it may be just the beginning of something worse. If the White House tries to ring me through central, don't switch it out here. Just tell them you reported McCord's arrest already, and I was very surprised."
Stan was asking for my package. I'm sure you've read about the St. George piece. Superficially it has a few good thoughts. Actually, it represents absolutely no "investigative journalism" at all. I can often spot that upon which he has improvised and conjectured, presenting his notions as established fact. The fact is that some is incredibly wrong and some just not credible. Intelligence agencies, in practice, are over the barrel. They can’t really deny, so an awful lot of garbage is accepted as manna. I’ve made a few marks if you want to discuss this. They should remind me. Impossible for Hartllez to have been on assignment for the CIA at the break-in. CIA was not out of favor 1969. Helms given wider authority long after that. There are and have to be other significant "national security" inputs to the White House. Most obvious, State Dept. He really doesn’t know the intelligence community well, not even from extensive reading. What interests me most of all is the possibility he is used by the revanchists of the right within CIA, of whom Hunt was one. And even on quotes, I doubt authenticity. Look at the end, Helms being told the White House gang was arrested. None of them except McCord, who was never on the WH payroll. The others were "whens only. Liddy Hunt and those of the past and those of whom we do not know, not one. People are inclined to trust the printed word, especially if there is an initial appeal to prejudices. Far from terror, the CIA was quite cooperative with the White House spokesmen, remarkably, I’d say, considering everything, more than has appeared in print. ...I started a column and am glad to get it. Too much to do for much reading, only in-between minutes. HW 10/29/73