

Jack Anderson and Les Whitten Liddy Trying for Early Release

G. Gordon Liddy, the silent man of the Watergate conspiracy, may soon be set free. Although he won't be eligible for parole until 1981, he has asked the Justice Department to commute his sentence. The request, according to our sources, is under "serious consideration."

The tight-lipped Liddy, a tenacious little man with a Groucho Marx mustache and a macho manner, had flair. Once he held his hand over a burning candle to impress friends.

Another time, he pulled out a pistol and shot out a street light so that Sen. George McGovern's presidential headquarters could be observed under proper cover of darkness. As an assistant district attorney, he whipped out a gun in court and fired at the ceiling to dramatize a robbery case. He was a fast draw.

For a mercifully brief period, Liddy thought he had been instructed by Jeb Magruder to kill me, a mission whose merit he divined automatically and embraced without question. He was on his way to gun me down when he was apprised that he had misunderstood Magruder. Liddy was disturbed over Magruder's imprecision of speech. "Where I come from," he grumbled, "that means a rub-out."

Later, Liddy tried to obtain some exotic poisons from the Central Intelligence Agency to use against me in a more sophisticated plot. "He hates the other side," Richard Nixon said of him.

Liddy was drummed off to prison, mouth shut and head erect, for a 21-year sentence. He became known to his fellow inmates at the Danbury, Conn., penitentiary and the Allentown, Pa., prison farm as "Watergate Liddy."

The prison records show that he has continued his nontalkative ways. A supervisor reported that Liddy "can be relied upon not to talk out of turn or pass on rumors. What he learns in the office stays in the office, and what he learns in the yard stays in the yard."

Liddy won't be eligible for parole until May, 1981, after serving eight years, two months. In contrast, the men responsible for Watergate — John N. Mitchell, H. R. (Bob) Haldeman and John D. Erlichman — will be eligible for parole after only 30 months.

Lesser Watergate figures, such as former Attorney General Richard G. Kleindienst, received light, suspended sentences. And, of course, Richard M. Nixon was pardoned for his White House crimes.

The Justice Department has received several setters, meanwhile, urging leniency for Liddy. We have had access to his confidential file.

For instance, Chesterfield Smith, former president of the American Bar Association, wrote: "The sentence given Mr. Liddy . . . seems to me to be outrageously out of line with sentences in the federal criminal justice system given to others under similar circumstances." Smith suggested that Liddy received excessive punishment for refusing to squeal on his associates.

The final decision on whether to commute Liddy's sentence will be up to President Carter, who, in the past, had advocated equal sentences for the same crimes.

Chinese Fallout: A confidential government report accuses the Environmental Protection Agency of failing to protect the public from the radioactive clouds that drifted over the

United States last year from China.

At the time, we charged that the EPA's warning system broke down and failed to detect the first traces of radioactivity from the Chinese nuclear explosion. We also reported that EPA neglected to warn farmers in advance that the fallout might contaminate milk.

The General Accounting Office has confirmed our story. According to its confidential findings, EPA "was unable to effectively carry out its responsibilities for monitoring radiation levels to determine whether they presented a public hazard." The result, states the report, was "misunderstanding, concern and confusion."

The government investigators also found bureaucratic bungling by both the Energy Research and Development Administration and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. ERDA is responsible for alerting the public to nuclear tests by foreign countries. Yet ERDA never notified the NRC, which, therefore, mistakenly concluded that the radioactivity was caused by airborne particles from a nuclear reactor in Pennsylvania.

The NRC, in turn, didn't report the fallout readings to EPA until "five days after the fallout occurred." The agency finally found out about the extent of contamination from Pennsylvania state officials. Not until then did EPA rush out a belated press release.

Footnote: An EPA spokesman acknowledged that there were "shortcomings in its procedures," but that they are being corrected. An NRC spokesman said it was EPA's responsibility to protect the public from radioactive fallout.