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Watergate's Little Ironies

Down through history, great events have turned on little things and the story of Watergate is no exception. If a young night watchman had not noticed the re-taping of a basement door, the Watergate burglars might never have been captured. If Alexander Butterfield, the President's former aide, had not been hard-pressed in a closed-door Ervin committee interview, and finally confronted with what was originally considered a shot-in-the-dark question, the existence of an indiscriminate, unselective, sound-activated White House recording system might have remained a secret and President Nixon would not have the problem of the tapes.

To this list of Watergate flukes I would add the events surrounding the burglary of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office. Given only a slightly

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different turn in this bizarre escapade, there might never have been a break-in at the Democratic Party's Watergate headquarters in the first place.

From March 1968 to September 1970, Daniel Ellsberg was a patient of Los Angeles psychiatrist Dr. Lewis J. Fielding. In 1971, Dr. Fielding kept the personal and professional medical records of his past patients in a locked steel file cabinet which stood in a storage area of his modest two-room office suite. Two groups of papers, one 25 pages, the other 40 pages, represented the records of Ellsberg's treatment. Prior to Saturday, September 3, 1971, these 65 pages of notes were inside an envelope in the bottom drawer of the locked steel cabinet.

Between 11 p.m. and midnight that Saturday night in 1971, three Cuban-Americans from Miami, recruited and directed by White House employees, broke into Dr. Fielding's small office with the sole purpose of finding and photographing those notes on Ellsberg. Trained for this type of covert activity by the CIA, the three burglars were working for two members of the special White House investigative unit—E. Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy. The plan was simple, yet sophisti-

cated.

Each of the burglars would have a particular function. The lead man, Bernard Barker as it turned out, would search for the documents. Before he did that, however, a second man, Felipe De Diego, would take a Polaroid picture of the desk top, desk drawer or file cabinet drawer as it was arranged before it was searched. Then, after Barker finished looking through it, De Diego, using the developed Polaroid picture, would replace things as they were before. If anything found was to be photographed, the third man, Eugenio Martinez, would plug in a high-intensity light and either he or Barker would take the picture with a 35-millimeter Minolta camera they also had with them. Before any work was begun, all three put on rubber gloves, to prevent fingerprints.

On August 30, 1971, according to the Watergate Special Prosecution Force indictment, Egil Krogh and David Young—Hunt's and Liddy's bosses—assured their boss, John Ehrlichman "that the planned entry into the offices of Dr. Fielding would not be traceable." All those involved with the plan apparently believed that this meant not only the White House would not be involved but that neither Dr. Fielding nor anyone else would ever know a break-in had even taken place.

The locked steel cabinet changed all that. Once inside Dr. Fielding's office, the burglars found no way to get into the file cabinet other than breaking it open. They then went through all four drawers including, apparently, the bottom one which contained what they were searching for. When the time came to leave, they intentionally

messed up the office throwing files and papers around on the floor. Their purpose was to make it appear that the room had been ransacked by someone looking for drugs in a doctor's office.

Everyone involved who has testified on the break-in—Hunt, Barker, Krogh, Young and Ehrlichman—maintained that the Ellsberg notes were never found. The Cuban-Americans admitted to a California grand jury that Barker took at least one picture with the Minolta camera—Ellsberg's name in Dr. Fielding's telephone directory. That camera and a Polaroid picture of the broken file cabinet were turned over to Hunt in the early morning hours of September 4, when the burglars returned to the hotel at which they were staying. None of the 35mm pictures has been found.

Liddy used a pay telephone, according to Hunt, to report to Krogh on what had happened and the latter ap-

parently voiced concern that Dr. Fielding's office had been vandalized. Ellsberg had been indicted little more than a month earlier and the White House men were worried that the connection would be quickly noted either by Ellsberg or the news media when the burglary was discovered.

The aftermath of the break-in is full of ironies. Take the burglars. Hunt apparently thought they had done a competent job and says he deduced the Ellsberg notes were probably in Dr. Fielding's apartment. Dr. Fielding said the notes were in the bottom file drawer and, moreover, he had left them inside an envelope and after the break-in he not only found them outside, but "this (set of notes) looked as if it had been fingered." If Dr. Fielding is correct, it would appear Barker or one of the others actually looked through the notes and did not realize what they were. Had Hunt known that, perhaps he would not have been so quick to employ the same team for the Watergate job. Hunt did show he learned one thing: for Watergate he had one burglar who was a locksmith.

The biggest irony rests with the manner in which Dr. Fielding treated the break-in. He was called down to his office on the following evening, after a janitor discovered what had happened.

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He told police he did not know why anyone, other than a vandal or addict, would have done such a thing. He did not call Ellsberg to inform him what had happened.

In June 1973, one month after the Ellsberg trial had ended in dismissal and more than 21 months after the break-in, Dr. Fielding appeared before the California grand jury which was investigating the burglary. He confirmed that he discovered the notes were in the cabinet and outside the envelope and that this raised his suspicions that perhaps the purpose of the burglary involved Ellsberg whom, he knew, had been indicted. He told the grand jury that he had not called his former patient because he could not be sure of his suspicions and did not want to cause him any additional anxiety.

But imagine for a moment what might have happened if that call had been made. Ellsberg's lawyers, almost certainly would have moved for discovery. They probably would not have found out about the Cuban-Americans, Hunt or Liddy. But they perhaps would have put a scare into the White House and maybe even given someone second thoughts about placing Liddy and Hunt in charge of any further covert operations.