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The Watergate Spies

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, Jan. 16—You don't have to be very smart to figure out what's going to happen to politics in the United States if the self-confessed burglars in the Watergate case are allowed to cover up who hired them to do the dirty work.

Their explanation of why they broke into and bugged the Democratic party's headquarters here is that they were somehow trying to protect the Republic from some Communist conspiracy, but they refused to say where the orders or the money came from.

When E. Howard Hunt Jr., former White House consultant and Central Intelligence agent, pleaded guilty to all seven counts of an indictment charging conspiracy, second degree burglary and wiretapping, he said: "Anything I may have done I believed to be in the best interests of my country."

Frank Sturgis of Norfolk, Va., also admitted everything except where he got his orders and told the judge: "When it comes to Cuba and the Communist conspiracy . . . I will do anything to protect this country."

Earlier, Bernard L. Barker, another of the men who pleaded guilty, developed much the same line of defense in an interview with The New York Times. Many Cuban refugees, he said,

believed that the election of Senator George McGovern as President "would be the beginning of a trend that would lead to Socialism or Communism, or whatever you want to call it."

There is, of course, nothing new in people believing that the election of the Presidential candidate they oppose will wreck the country. Every Democratic candidate since Franklin Roosevelt has been charged with leading the country to Socialism.

The new thing in the Watergate case is that former intelligence agents like Hunt, who was operational head of the C.I.A.'s Cuban Bay of Pigs disaster and seems to be the clumsiest spy in the business, have actually been using the techniques of espionage to infiltrate the American democratic process and to cover up the source of their orders with claims of patriotic zeal.

The possibilities of this sort of thing in American politics are virtually endless. Nothing is more casual or vulnerable than the headquarters of an American political party or Presidential candidate. All of them are staffed by pick-up teams of "volunteers," most of them unknown to the candidate. *

The Watergate case, however, was different. Somebody organized and financed the conspiracy, and despite persistent questioning by Chief U.S. District Judge John J. Sirica, he was not able to get the confessed burglars

to say who hired them or to give him anything but the standard answers spies are usually instructed to make when they are caught.

"What did Cuba have to do with breaking in and entering the Democratic headquarters?" Judge Sirica asked Virgilio R. Gonzales, a 46-year-old former Cuban refugee. "I don't know," Gonzales replied. "He [Hunt] told me and I believed him."

It was inconceivable to the judge that this conspiracy had been planned, financed and carried out solely by the men indicted, and when all of them evaded his questions about the source of the money, the judge said, "Well, I'm sorry but I don't believe you."

The chances are, therefore, that Hunt and the others who pleaded guilty will refuse to incriminate others either in Judge Sirica's court or even in the Senate investigation now being planned by Senator Sam Ervin of North Carolina; so the major deterrent to the spread of political spying is likely to lie in the severity of the penalties imposed by the courts.

From the beginning, there has been a tendency either to disbelieve the charges in this case or to minimize them as an extension of the normal dirty tricks of American political campaigns. But something more than that is involved in this conspiracy. For what we are seeing here is the application

of the techniques of international espionage to national politics—a kind of political warfare that can destroy the democratic election process.

The only hopeful sign in all this is that Hunt and Company were so remarkably stupid and awkward. The testimony is now clear that they not only bugged the Democratic headquarters but paid at least one operator to spy on Senator Edmund Muskie and Senator George McGovern. And on the assumption that everybody is not as clumsy as Hunt and his gang, one has to wonder how much more of this was going on in the last campaign by agents who weren't caught.

One result of all this is that a great deal of damage has already been done. For candidates for all public offices from mayor to President will now have to guard their offices and staffs as if they were engaged in combat with a foreign enemy.

Not so long ago, politicians could assume that, even in the bitterest of campaigns, there were some things that went beyond the bounds of honor, but now they can't be sure. Accordingly, the Congress can at least drag this dirty business out before the TV cameras and let the voters judge for themselves what's been going on, for part of the trouble with the Watergate case has been that so many didn't quite believe what was happening.

*Compare with the same column, as carried by SFChronicle 21 Jan 73 (where it is filed). Chronicle omits several paragraphs in the Times version, but includes the following paragraph, omitted here:

In the emotion of the campaign, it is easy to find volunteers who believe the other candidate is a scoundrel who should be defeated by any means in the interests of the country. George Wallace was shot by a man who was posing as one of his supporters. The two Kennedys were killed by men who thought they were serving some higher political purpose by assassination.

New Orleans States-Item 18 Jan 73 uses this paragraph.