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Washington Merry-Go-Round

by JACK ANDERSON



WASHINGTON — The efforts of President Nixon's dirty-tricks crew to disrupt and discredit the Democrats, say investigators, were carefully coordinated inside the White House. The political sabotage had these objectives:

1. When Sen. Ed Muskie pulled ahead of the President in the polls last year, worried White House aides sought to trip up the popular Maine Democrat. Muskie has complained that he was a victim of a "systematic campaign of sabotage." Some of the dirty tricks, including the forged "Canuck letter" which made it appear he condoned a racial slur, caused him serious political damage and contributed to his poor showing in the presidential primaries.

2. The political strategists in the White House concluded that George Wallace as a third-party candidate would take votes away from the President but as a Democratic contender could cause mischief for the Democrats. The White House, therefore, encouraged the Alabama governor to seek the Democratic nomination and worked undercover to help roll up votes for him in the Democratic primaries. In the crucial Florida primary, Sen. Henry Jackson contended with Wallace for conservative Democratic votes. Jackson tells us his campaign

was hampered by political sabotage, not unlike the dirty tricks played on Muskie.

3. The White House strategists considered George McGovern to be the easiest contender for the President to beat. They sought, therefore, to help McGovern win the California primary, which sewed up the Democratic nomination for him. McGovern's chief rival, Hubert Humphrey told us his campaign in California was often fouled up. But except for a phony press release put out on his letterhead, Humphrey said he had no evidence of political sabotage. "I have to take some credit for the foul-ups myself," he said.

4. Once McGovern was nominated, the White House objective was to portray McGovern as a radical and to link him with irresponsible elements who favored political violence. A Washington Post source claims White House aide Howard Hunt tried to organize "an attack" by demonstrators in McGovern's name upon the Doral Beach Hotel, which served as President Nixon's convention headquarters at Miami Beach. Subsequent to the conventions, McGovern's campaign has been subjected to political harassment. His national coordinator, Frank Mankiewicz, gave us some examples.

White House sources tell us that the President's chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, was the key man who coordinated the efforts to hamstring Muskie, boost Wallace and abet McGovern's nomination. Although there is no direct documentary link between Haldeman and the sabotage squad, he issued instructions and received reports on all phases of the campaign.

Presidential appointments secretary Dwight Chapin, who has been linked by the Washington Post to the sabotage operation, worked closely with Haldeman, say our sources. White House aide Gordon Strachan, whom Time magazine claims was also involved with the dirty-tricks department, is a member of Haldeman's staff.

Perhaps the most irresponsible of the dirty tricks was a reported attempt to shut off the runway lights on a small field in northern Florida where Senator Jackson planned to land. The senator received a report that someone had phoned the airport to cancel arrangements for lighting the runway. The call was countermanded, however, in time to prevent a serious accident to Jackson and his party.

Muskie also had flight trouble, according to the Washington Post. On a charter flight from California to Oregon, the pilot followed false instructions and

brought Muskie down for an unscheduled stop in Salem, Ore.

One of the dirtiest tricks was the circulation of a phony flyer on Muskie's stationery, accusing Jackson and Humphrey of illicit sexual affairs. This hurt Muskie at the same time that it smeared his two Democratic rivals. Jackson asked the U.S. Attorney's office in Tampa, where the smear sheet was mailed, to investigate whether this violated the federal laws against anonymous political mailings. But so far, Jackson has received no answer.

Muskie encountered his worst harassment during the New Hampshire primary where phony calls and statements were made in his name. Jackson had his worst time in Florida. Someone broke into his headquarters in Miami, for example, and stole a taped endorsement by ex-Senator Harry Cain. It was too late to get Cain to tape another endorsement for use on the eve of the primary.

Like Muskie in New Hampshire, Jackson in Florida also had trouble with callers who attempted to disrupt his campaign schedule. False reports would be put out at campaign stops that he wasn't coming. At Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach, for example, a false report almost sent the audience home before his speech.

Once it was clear McGovern would be the nominee, he suddenly became the victim of dirty tricks. Someone impersonating Gary Hart, for example, telephoned AFL-CIO President George Meany and virtually ordered him to meet McGovern in New York City the following morning. Needless to say, the furious Meany never showed up and still refuses to endorse McGovern.

Similar calls were made to Jersey City labor leaders telling them to appear at a rally that had never been scheduled for vice presidential nominee Sargent Shriver.

Other mysterious callers, claiming to be Hart, have told newsmen: "We are not Democrats. We are McGovernites." One of the Republican campaign objectives, it happens, is to portray McGovern supporters as McGovernites rather than Democrats.

No less than TV commentator Walter Cronkite has heard from a Hart imitator. The seasoned Cronkite, however, quickly tagged the caller as a phony.

The full story of dirty campaign tricks by both sides should be explored by a nonpartisan commission before the November election.