

EHRlichman CALLS SECRECY JUSTIFIED

Ties 1971 Security Mission
by Intelligence Unit to Acts
to Hide Group's Existence

7/27/73
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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, July 26 —

John D. Ehrlichman said today that the special White House intelligence unit undertook in 1971 a mission so important to national security that it justified President Nixon's efforts to hide the group's existence.

Mr. Ehrlichman, the former assistant to the President for domestic matters, did not disclose the nature of the mission but told the Senate Watergate

*Excerpts from the testimony
will be found on Page 11.*

committee this afternoon that it was not "inherently" related to the Watergate conspiracy.

He said that efforts by Government and Senate investigators to learn the truth about the Watergate case might have jeopardized the secrecy of the highly sensitive mission. G. Gordon Liddy and E. Howard Hunt, Jr., two of the Watergate conspirators, once worked for the special White House intelligence unit, called the "plumbers" because it sought to plug leaks of Government secrets.

Mr. Ehrlichman and his lawyer, John J. Wilson, told the Senate Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities that they were under specific White House orders not

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to disclose the nature of the 1971 mission.

But Mr. Ehrlichman said that he would be willing to discuss it in a secret session of the committee if the White House approved, and Mr. Wilson offered to seek the approval if the Senators would guarantee that they would not disclose the information later.

"Leaks out of your commit-

tee have been colossal," Mr. Wilson declared.

Frank A. Sturgis, another Watergate conspirator, was quoted in The New York Times earlier this year as saying that he worked under Hunt on a 1971 investigation of illicit drug traffic into the United States from Mexico, Paraguay and Panama.

In addition, there were published reports last spring that the "plumbers" were suspected of engaging in illegal measures, perhaps even an aborted assassination plan, aimed at Brig. Gen. Omar Torrijos Herrera, the military ruler of Panama.

Mr. Ehrlichman did not refer to any of these reports today, but said that the matter was so "heavily weighed in favor of national security" that he was confident the Senators would agree with him if they learned the details.

The injection of a note of mystery came in Mr. Ehrlichman's third full day at the witness table in the televised hearings into the burglary of the Democratic headquarters in the Watergate complex and its subsequent cover-up. Mr. Ehrlichman is to return for a fourth appearance tomorrow.

Mr. Ehrlichman testified that he and Mr. Nixon were convinced last summer, on the basis of oral reports from John W. Dean 3d, the deposed White House legal counsel, that no one at the Executive Mansion had been involved in the Watergate break-in.

He clashed at length with several members of the panel whose questions evidenced deep skepticism about the witness's consistent denials of involvement in anything connected to a Watergate cover-up.

"It didn't dawn on me that there was a cover-up going on," Mr. Ehrlichman insisted late in the day.

Senator Howard H. Baker Jr. of Tennessee, the Republican vice chairman of the investigating committee, pressed Mr. Ehrlichman for some explanation of the secret 1971 "plumbers" operation. He said that the issue was "terribly important" because it bore on the President's conduct after the Watergate break-in on June 17, 1972.

'We Are Not Playing Games'

"I need to know whether or not we're playing games," Senator Baker told the witness.

"We are not playing games," Mr. Ehrlichman replied.

How, the Senator pressed on, could the committee be certain? He said that the matter "won't float" on Mr. Ehrlichman's assurances alone, and that the panel seemed to have been put in "an untenable position" by

the White House restrictions on discussion of the "plumbers" mission.

Mr. Wilson said that he did not even know himself what the substance of the matter was, but that he would seek White House permission for Mr. Ehrlichman's secret testimony on it—or, alternatively, for a briefing by someone else—if the close meeting was limited to the Senators and they guaranteed that the information would "go no farther." Senator Baker said that he would have to consider that option.

At one point, Senator Baker asked Mr. Ehrlichman if the 1971 mission was so important to national security that Mr. Ehrlichman would "bite the bullet" and "take all the punishment" dealt by the Senate committee to witnesses from the upper echelons of the White House or the Committee for the Re-election of the President.

"In my opinion, it's that important," Mr. Ehrlichman answered somberly.

Earlier in the day, the committee dealt a certain amount of punishment to Mr. Ehrlichman in the form of biting, sardonic and occasionally hostile interrogation. The witness, whose demeanor the two previous days ranged from assertive to belligerent was generally complaint today, although he got off an acid retort to Senator Sam J. Ervin Jr., the North Carolina Democrat who is the committee chairman.

Chided Over Hoover

Senator Ervin assailed Mr. Ehrlichman for suggesting yesought to have dismissed the late J. Edgar Hoover as director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and for saying that the White House "plumbers" unit had been established because of an unresponsive attitude on Mr. Hoover's part during the Pentagon papers investigation.

The Senator suggested that, to the contrary, the White House sought to curtail the F.B.I. investigation of the Watergate case last year, during the Presidential campaign, and that it was difficult for him to accept Mr. Ehrlichman's assertions that the President was seeking a vigorous Watergate inquiry.

"I am reminded of the par-

able of the good Samaritan," Senator Ervin said.

He recounted the biblical story of the priests and Levites who disregarded the traveler to Jericho who had been set upon by thieves, and added:

"The evidence in this case tends to show thus far that the people in charge of the committee to Re-lect the President, the people in charge of the Finance Committee to Re-lect the President and the White House aides, like the priests and Levites, walked on the other side and pretended that this thing did not occur."

Mr. Ehrlichman asked for permission to respond. Mr. Wilson asked him, in a barely audible voice, "Are you going to use a parable."

Reports to President

"I read the Bible but I do not quote it," Mr. Ehrlichman replied loudly, in an apparent rejoinder to the committee chairman's frequent invocation of Scripture.

He went on to say that the President had been assured, both by Mr. Dean and by former Attorney General Richard G. Kleindienst, that the "most since the assassination of President Kennedy had concluded that the seven original Watergate defendants 'were, in fact, the only ones involved' in the break-in.

Late in the day, Mr. Ehrlichman gave Senator Edward J. Gurney, Republican of Florida, the most detailed explanation to date of the background of Mr. Nixon's declaration last Aug. 29 that no one in the White House had been involved in the planning or execution of the Watergate burglary.

The witness said that, after receiving such assurances from Mr. Kleindienst on July 31, and in the belief that "I had the straight word," he told Mr. Nixon of the Justice Department's report.

He said that it was his feeling then that Watergate was "a political liability that ought to be shed" and that, in the political campaign, Mr. Nixon could "take the shock" of the disclosure that officials of his re-election committee had been involved.

At a meeting last August, Mr. Ehrlichman went on, he urged that the campaign committee "lay out the whole story." But he said that the suggestion had been rejected by the meeting participants, who included former Attorney General John N. Mitchell; Charles W. Colson, a former special White House counsel; Clark MacGregor, then the campaign director, and Bryce N. Harlow, a former White House official.

Later that month, he said, after the President was nomi-

nated for a second term at the Republican National Convention, he made the same suggestion to Mr. Nixon. He said that the President had asked him how sure he was no one in the White House had been involved and that he had given Mr. Nixon the judgment that he was certain.

On the basis of that information, Mr. Ehrlichman said, the President made the Aug. 29 statement that has since haunted the White House.

'I Am Not Your Man'

In wide-ranging and contentious questioning this morning, Senators Lowell P. Weicker Jr., Republican of Connecticut, and Joseph M. Montoya, Democrat of New Mexico, repeatedly hammered at Mr. Ehrlichman but punched few visible holes in the former White House aide's mantle of self-assurance.

When Senator Weicker sought information from the witness about a 1971 memorandum describing White House efforts to arrange a Congressional investigation into the leak of the Pentagon papers, Mr. Ehrlichman said, "I'm not your best witness on that."

So far as the investigation was concerned, Mr. Ehrlichman added moments later, "I am not your man."

The Senator, peering over his metal-rimmed glasses, declared bluntly, "You are my man. You are a good witness."

He proceeded with a long list of combative questions and, at length, challenged Mr. Ehrlichman's earlier testimony about the White House discovery last April 15 that L. Patrick Gray 3d, then acting director of the F.B.I. had destroyed documents taken from the White House safe of Hunt, the Watergate conspirator.

"Was any action taken by the President?" the Senator asked.

Mr. Ehrlichman responded that Mr. Nixon asked for a Justice Department investigation the same day "so that he would know how to take the next step."

Public Disclosure

But the Senator said that Mr. Gray remained at his post until he was forced to resign 13 days later by the public disclosure of the destruction of the papers. Then the Senator told Mr. Ehrlichman and the television audience that it had been the Senator who had leaked the information to the news media.

In a long soliloquy tinged with emotion, Mr. Weicker said that Mr. Gray, who also is from Connecticut, was a close friend, but that when Mr. Gray disclosed the same information to him on April 25, or 10 days after the President learned of it, he felt compelled to make sure "that the story was laid

out in front of the public as soon as I got it."

Mr. Ehrlichman, undaunted by the suggestion that Mr. Nixon had been loath to act, declared, "The President notified the chief law enforcement officer and you notified the newspapers. As I say, it's two different approaches to the same problem." He added that the delay had led to discovery of other investigative information and that the President had been correct in proceeding "in an orderly fashion."

Elicits Confirmation

Minutes later, though, Senator Weicker drew from Mr. Ehrlichman confirmation that the former Presidential aide abandoned Mr. Gray, in effect, when Mr. Gray's nomination to be permanent F.B.I. director ran into difficulty in the Senate.

Had Mr. Ehrlichman not said, in the confirmation fight, the Senator asked, that the White House "ought to let him hang there, let him twist slowly, slowly in the wind."