

A Forum for Ideas, Analysis, and Diverse Opinions

I do not agree with a word that you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.

—Voltaire

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Bob Wiedrich

E. Howard Hunt deserves a break



WE HOLD no brief for the architects of Watergate. If they are proven guilty, may American justice lift their scalps.

But surely there is room for some compassion in the case of E. Howard Hunt Jr., a broken, 55-year-old man who proudly declares he served his country well as an agent of the CIA and its cloak-and-dagger predecessor, the OSS, during World War II and for 21 years thereafter.

It is easy to see how he fell prey to the master conspirators of Watergate.

"SPY" TODAY is a dirty word in some quarters. However, when Hunt began his professional career, it was an honored one. As an OSS agent in South China, Hunt helped disrupt Japanese communications lines in enemy-occupied territory.

And after the war, before conducting a number of clandestine CIA operations for which he was cited, Hunt's training was refined in covert and counter-intelligence work, electronic surveillance, document forgery, and surreptitious entry into guarded quarters—all tools of an anonymous, often unsung trade.

Remember, these were the years of the Cold War, of high-strung international tensions.

Many of those who find it easy to condemn Hunt today are not old enough to recall the theft of atomic secrets from the United States that gave Soviet Russia a royal flush in the post-war world and led to a globe living under the threat of nuclear war for nearly three decades. There was no detente then in Peking or Moscow,

They forget the armed confrontations between nations—the Berlin crises, the Berlin Wall, the Korean war, the Cuban missile crises. They overlook the fact the other side had its intelligence agents, too — Col. Rudolf Abel and others who served their countries loyally, just as did Hunt. Spying was a job that had to be done. Somebody had to do it. And fortunately for this nation, Hunt and other men elected to do it.

Thus, Hunt became a well trained intelligence operative with deeply ingrained responses of obedience to command, a conditioned reflex essential in a profession where hesitancy can result in death or the failure of an operation. If we can accept his credentials, he was a dedicated patriot.

Now comes the end of a 21-year career with the CIA. There is little demand for retired spies. But then there is a call from Charles W. Colson at the White House. Hunt's covert intelligence expertise is once again needed by his country. He is told there are national security leaks that must be plugged.

Surely, one can understand this must have been heady stuff. In July of 1971, Colson is no slouch. He is the White House troubleshooter, special counsel to Richard M. Nixon, President of the United States. When Hunt is asked if he will serve again, it is difficult to resist a summons from on high, from the very top of the nation he has served faithfully for many years. It is an honor. He is given an office and his own safe at the White House.

Against a background of unquestioned obedience to his country, to whom can Hunt turn for confirmation of Colson's commands? Certainly, he cannot call the President himself to verify Colson's authority.

In 1972, Hunt is told there is strong suspicion the Democrats are getting campaign funds from Cuban Communist Dictator Fidel Castro. Again, this fits neatly with Hunt's background as a CIA planner of the Bay of Pigs invasion.

FURTHER, FROM Hunt's new found proximity to the executive branch of government, there is an aura of implied sanction of the intelligence-gathering plans by the Presidency and the then attorney general, John Mitchell, chief law officer of the land. In Hunt's mind, the Watergate break-in must be legal and on the square.

Unquestionably, spying has always been a dirty business. But in times of war and Cold War, it has often demanded of its practitioners the utmost in courage. Spies can easily cast themselves blindly in a heroic mold, especially when recalled in the name of the Presidency.

People forget that Nathan Hale was a spy. What if he had not been hung by the British? What if President Washington had used him as an agent against his political enemies in later years? How would Hunt's critics regard that 21-year-old today?