

Ehrlichman on Spot

Contradicts Nixon on Hunt

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WASHINGTON. — President Nixon and his former top domestic assistant, John Ehrlichman, have told sharply different stories about a crucial incident that preceded the Watergate affair.

The President's 4,000-word Watergate statement of May 22, and Ehrlichman's 19-page statement of May 30, provide conflicting answers to two key questions:

—Who asked the Central Intelligence Agency to help E. Howard Hunt, a White House "consultant" who burglarized Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office in 1971, and a year later was caught burglarizing Democratic headquarters in the Watergate?

—What exactly was Hunt hired by the White House to do?

Although the incident occurred almost two years ago, it casts doubt on the credibility of either Mr. Nixon's or Ehrlichman's version of history. It raises the question as to why these two powerful men, who were formerly so close, should be telling different stories in public.

It indicates that Ehrlichman, who faces the possibility of being indicted for obstruction of justice, may now be fighting to save his own skin — even if he has to contradict the President.

A crack in Nixon's inner ring — meaning Ehrlichman, former White House Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman and former Attorney General John Mitchell — is probably the only way the President himself could be involved in the scandal.

The Hunt incident began in June 1971.

On June 13, the New York Times printed the first installment of the Pentagon Papers. On June 16, Ellsberg was identified as the source of the leak. On July 6, Hunt, a retired CIA agent, was hired by the White House as a part-time "consultant." On July 22, Hunt visited Gen. Robert Cushman (then deputy director of the CIA) and asked for CIA "technical assistance," which was given him. On Aug. 27, Cushman called Ehrlichman

and told him that Hunt's demands were unreasonable and the CIA didn't want to have anything more to do with him. On the first weekend in September, Hunt broke into Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office in Los Angeles in an unsuccessful effort to photograph Ellsberg's file.

On this much, Mr. Nixon and Ehrlichman agree. Here is where their stories differ:

In his May 22 statement, Mr. Nixon said: "During the week following the Pentagon Papers publication (June 13-20, 1971), I approved the creation of a Special Investigations Unit within the White House which later came to be known as the 'plumbers' . . . I looked to John Ehrlichman for the supervision of this group. Egil Krogh, Mr. Ehrlichman's assistant, was put in charge. David Young was added to this unit, as were E. Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy.

"The unit operated under extremely tight security rules. Its existence and functions were known only to very few persons at the White House. These included Messrs. Haldeman, Ehrlichman and Dean.

"At about the time the unit was created, Daniel Ellsberg was identified as the person who had given the Pentagon Papers to the New York Times (that would be June 16). I told Mr. Krogh that as a matter of first priority, the unit should find out all it could about Mr. Ellsberg's associates and his motives."

Hunt was hired July 6. "About July 7," according to a sworn affidavit by Gen. Cushman, Ehrlichman called him at CIA headquarters and said Hunt was a White House employe and would be asking for CIA help on "security matters." Minutes of a CIA staff meeting on July 8 indicate that Cushman had received such a call from Ehrlichman, according to sworn testimony by former CIA Director Richard Helms.

Thus Mr. Nixon's account, supported by Cushman and Helms, seems clearly to establish that the plumbers were created in June, and that Ehrlichman asked the CIA to help Hunt on or about July 7. It also strongly indicates that Hunt's mission was to investigate Ellsberg.

Ehrlichman's statement,

which was released by his lawyers on May 30, sets out a different version of events.

Ehrlichman did not flatly deny that he called Cushman on or about July 7, but insisted, "I do not have the faintest recollection of having done so."

Ehrlichman took pains to give the impression that someone else, not he, initiated the request for CIA help to Hunt.

Cushman reiterated Thursday that CIA records show that it was Ehrlichman who asked the agency to provide assistance to Hunt.

In August, when Cushman called Ehrlichman to complain about Hunt, Ehrlichman said he wondered "how Hunt had obtained help from the CIA in the first place."

"At no time during the August 1971 conversation did the general (Cushman) imply, suggest or state that I had initiated or sponsored Hunt's assistance from the CIA," Ehrlichman said.

Ehrlichman admitted that he met Hunt at the White House on July 7, the day after he was hired, and discussed his assignment. But according to Ehrlichman, Hunt's job was to be "a review of the content of the Pentagon Papers to determine their authenticity and accuracy."

Ehrlichman also set out a time schedule for the formation of the plumbers that differs from Mr. Nixon's.

He said the plumbers "did not come into being" until July 24, when the President discussed the project with him and Krogh.

This version contradicts the President's statement that "I approved the creation of . . . the plumbers' during the week of June 13-20."

Mr. Nixon's statement said that he assigned "a number of other investigatory matters" to the plumbers, including "compiling an accurate record of events related to the Vietnam war" (and) "tracing down other national security leaks."

But contrary to Ehrlichman's story, the President left no doubt that the plumbers' were created specifically in response to the Pentagon Papers leak and that their "first priority" was Ellsberg.

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