

The Plumbers' Assignment: Destruction of Ed and Ted in '72

By Joseph Kraft

“... ‘Watergate’ is not just a crazy and unnecessary burglary. It represents a serious plot to undermine democracy in the U. S....”

What was it all about—that crazy mixed-up Watergate business with its burglaries, hush money, and espionage? Well, even before the release of the White House-edited tape transcripts, I emerged from a thorough review of Senate and court testimony with an unmistakable impression—that, back in 1971, with the President’s re-election in grave doubt, the Nixon White House set in motion a systematic campaign to destroy the Democrats’ two most potent prospects for 1972—Senators Edward Kennedy and Edmund Muskie—and that this was the motive behind the crimes of the so-called White House Plumbers.

The core of the evidence for this motive is a series of telephone calls and inner White House memos that led directly to the burglary attempt against the office of Daniel Ellsberg’s psychiatrist on September 3, 1971, and on to the Watergate caper itself.

It shows a chain of events beginning July 1, 1971, with a call placed and taped by Charles Colson, a senior White House aide with political responsibilities, to E. Howard Hunt, a retired C.I.A. agent nursing bitter feelings against the Kennedy clan because of the unsuccessful Bay of Pigs operation. The subject was the passing of the Pentagon Papers by Ellsberg, who had just been indicted for it. Iago on his worst day never used the power of suggestion in less subtle ways than Colson. Here, arranged in sequence and without Hunt’s responses, are some of Colson’s remarks:

Tell me something, as a good observer of the political scene, what do you think of this Ellsberg prosecution?

Do you think this guy is a lone wolf?

One question that occurs to me. This thing could go one of two ways. Ellsberg could be turned into a martyr of the new left (he probably will be anyway), or it could be another Alger Hiss case where the guy is exposed, other people were operating with him and this may be the way to really carry it out. . . .

Let me ask you this, Howard, this ques-

tion. Do you think, with the right resources employed, that this thing could be turned into a major public case against Ellsberg and co-conspirators?

Then your answer would be we should go down the line to nail the guy cold?

This case won’t be tried in court, it will be tried in the newspapers. So it’s going to take some resourceful engineering to. . . .

I think it can be done, I think there are ways to do it, and I don’t think this guy is operating alone.

Oh, no. I’m thinking of the enemy.

I think there is a fertile field here, and I just thought I’d try it out on you to see what you thought of it.

Absolutely. What do you think of doing, the idea of declassifying a lot of these old documents now?

Weren’t you the guy who told me, maybe the last time we were up to your house for dinner, that if the truth ever came out about Kennedy and the Bay of Pigs, that it would just destroy them?

Five days later, after Colson had checked with the top White House aide, H. R. Haldeman, Hunt went to work at the White House as a consultant. His actions from that point forward leave no doubt that he believed he had been hired to smear the leading Democratic candidates by, among other things, linking them with Ellsberg and anything evil that had happened in Vietnam. Two days after taking his new job, Hunt received in his White House office Lucien Conein, a former C.I.A. agent in South Vietnam who had been intimately familiar with the 1963 military coup which led to the overthrow and subsequent assassination of President Ngo Dinh Diem. That July 8 discussion was replayed in part in a phone call on July 9 with Colson listening in, taping, and, under the *nom de guerre* Fred Charles, putting some questions himself. The conversation bore on two related subjects. The first involved the 1963 coup against Diem. Hunt raised the matter by reminding Conein that in their White House meeting the day before he had “posed an interesting thought . . . on something that sounded

entirely logical to me. I’d never heard it espoused before, and it had to do with your thoughts that the Catholicism of the then President [Kennedy] was a factor.” Having introduced that thought, Hunt worked the talk around to cables from Washington to Saigon regarding the coup. Colson, speaking as Fred Charles, asked Conein pointblank: “Do you know who the instructions came from?” When Conein said he didn’t, Hunt and Colson pressed him. They named as possible sources Averell Harriman, McGeorge Bundy, Robert Kennedy. When Conein mentioned General Maxwell Taylor, Hunt said: “And you characterized Max Taylor as being Bobby’s spokesman?”

A little later, Hunt went through the whole file of cable traffic between Washington and Saigon at the time of the coup. Failing to find what he wanted, he forged a number of cables linking President Kennedy directly to the coup. He prepared an article for publication in *Life* magazine under Lucien Conein’s by-line titled “How Kennedy Killed Diem.” And in hopes of promoting an in-house piece on this theme, he showed some of the cables to William Lambert of *Life*.

The forged cables no longer exist. After Hunt was arrested in the Watergate burglary, he told Colson’s secretary to empty his safe. The safe was drilled open by a team led by John Dean, and the compromising material removed. Some of it, including the Hunt forgeries, was later passed by Dean and John Ehrlichman to the acting F.B.I. director, Patrick Gray. In keeping with what he thought were his instructions from Dean and Ehrlichman, Gray burned the material. But Hunt’s purpose in forging cables was explored in the Senate hearings. Said Hunt:

I believe it was desired by Mr. Colson, or at least some of his colleagues, to demonstrate that a Catholic U.S. administration had, in fact, conspired in the assassi-

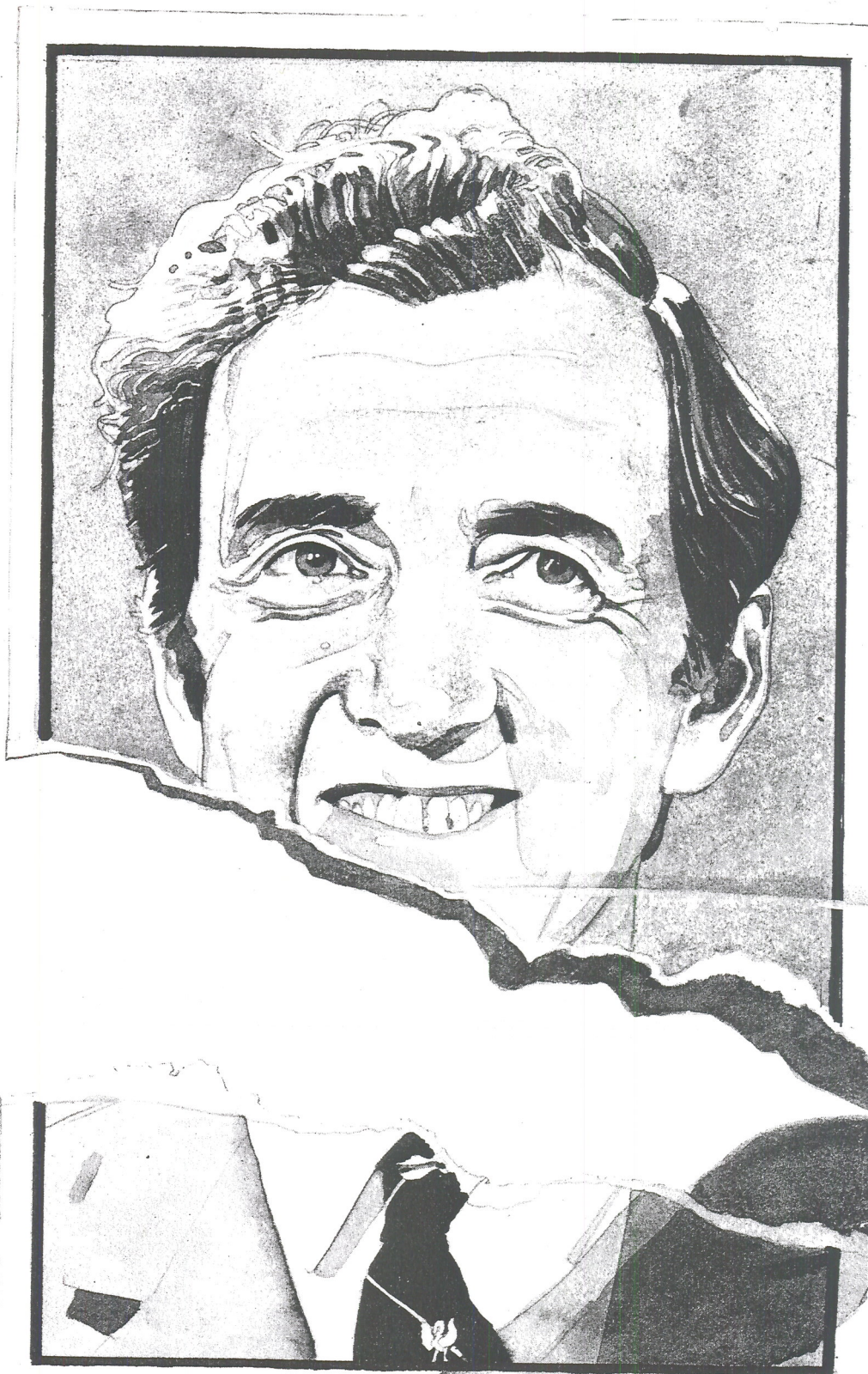
nation of a Catholic chief of state in another country.

The second item of business in the bizarre three-way phone call of July 9 between Hunt, Colson, and Conein concerned Ellsberg. Hunt asked Conein about a possible connection between Ellsberg and a certain Germaine, the Saigon mistress of a Corsican restaurateur named Nicolai, who was allegedly an opium smuggler. Hunt asked Conein several questions, apparently linking Ellsberg with Germaine and Nicolai. Colson, speaking as Fred Charles, put in: "Do you think Ellsberg . . . had any connections with the drug trafficking?"

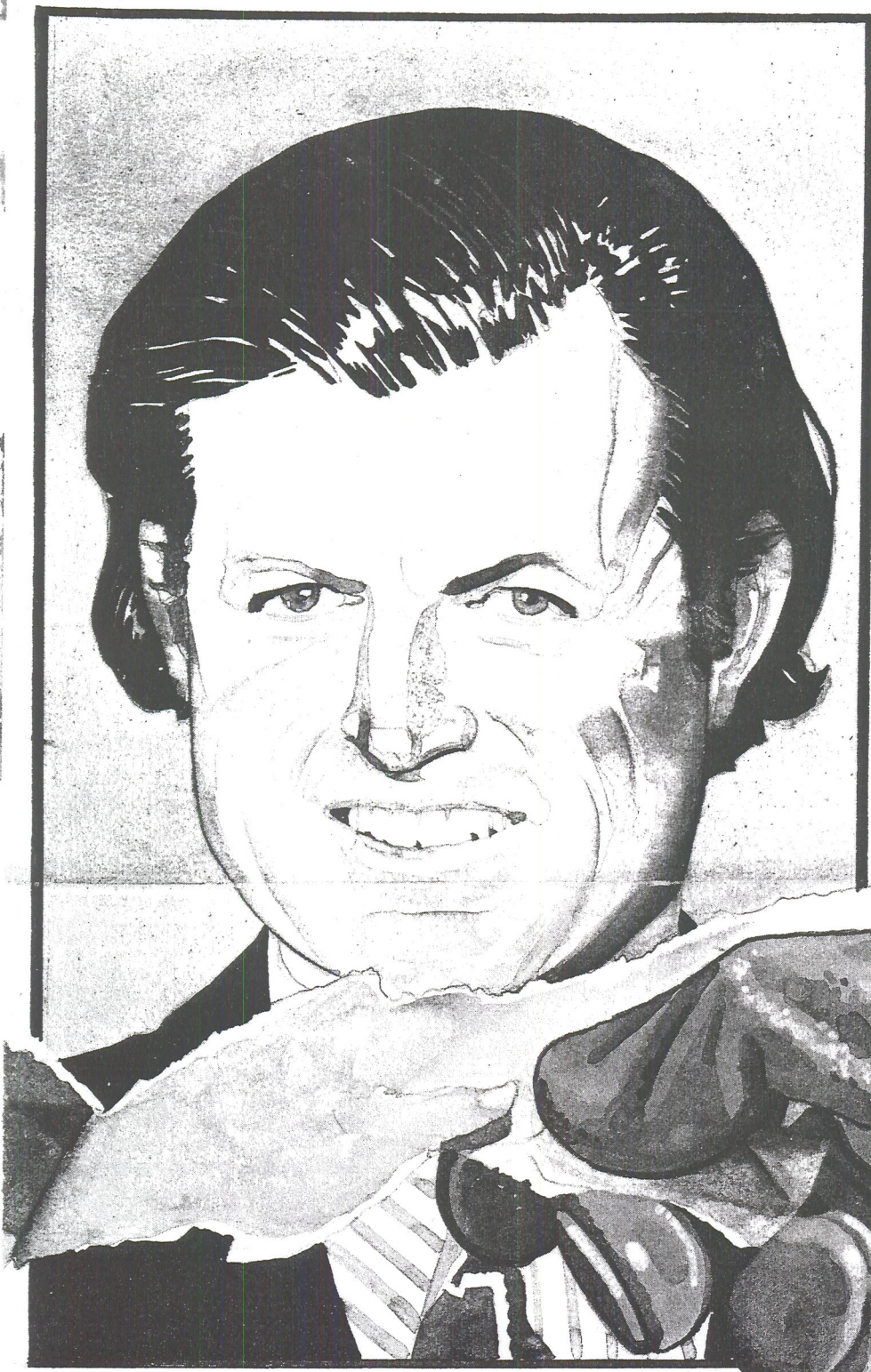
Conein didn't know, but Hunt didn't stop asking. The question was raised again by Hunt in a memorandum prepared for Colson on July 28. The subject of the memo was "Neutralization of Ellsberg." Hunt wrote that building up a file on Ellsberg was "essential in determining how to destroy his public image and credibility." One of Hunt's proposals was to "interview Ellsberg's Saigon contacts: the restaurant owner, Nicolai, and his mistress, whom Ellsberg coveted." A second was to "request C.I.A. to perform a covert psychological assessment/evaluation on Ellsberg." A third was to "obtain Ellsberg's files from his psychiatric analyst."

That July 28 memo to Colson drew a response on August 3 in another memo to Colson from Egil Krogh and David Young, two junior aides the President put to work under John Ehrlichman in the unit which had become known as "the Plumbers," set up to stop leaks. Their August 3 memo bears the title of Hunt's description of the purpose of the operation: "Neutralization of Ellsberg." It indicates that one proposal made by Hunt in his July 28 memo was already "in train"—preparation of a C.I.A. psychological profile. As to Hunt's other proposals, including obtaining files from Ellsberg's analyst, the memo says: "We will look into the other suggestions. . . ."

A second memo, this one dated August 11, from Krogh and Young to Ehrlichman, shows the Plumbers bowling down the path traced by Hunt. The memo recommends, and Ehrlichman approves, "a covert operation" to get the analyst's files. It also reports cooperation from the C.I.A. (on the psychiatric profile) and the F.B.I. (which put the case on a "special," or urgent, basis). The memo adds that the Justice Department is moving to call up a goodly number of political figures for a Boston grand jury in the Ellsberg case. The targets included two strategically placed Democrats, K. Dun Gifford, a former member of Senator Kennedy's staff, and Richard Steadman, the former special assistant to Secretary of Defense Rob-



vote



ert McNamara. Finally, the August 11 memo refers to another memo, this one from the National Security Council staff on "(a) Ellsberg case; (b) an exposé of the 1963 coup; and (c) the drug situation in South Vietnam."

On August 26, 1971, Young wrote to Ehrlichman, and it is this memo that indicates for the first time the possible handling of material on Ellsberg and others. The basic idea, which had been explored with Congressmen Edward Hébert and Leslie Arends, was that an investigation of and hearing on the Pentagon Papers leak "under a subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee" would:

develop a very negative picture around the whole Pentagon study affair (preparation to publication) and then to identify Ellsberg's associates and supporters on the new left with this negative image. The end result would be to show (1) how they were intent on undermining the policy of the government they were supposedly serving, and (2) how they sought to put themselves above the law.

The August 26 memo goes on to identify various people believed to be involved in the preparation and leaking of the material and suggests that they be subjected to special "adversary" questioning. This list included several prominent Democrats, among them former Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford

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“...The game plan: an inquiry to publicize damaging material about Democrats...”

and former Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Warnke—both then active in the campaign of Senator Muskie for the Presidential nomination. (Clifford and Warnke have told me that they were in fact subjected to special questions from the Defense Department about the Pentagon Papers.) The memo ends with several issues linked to the basic question of “do we want to prosecute or do we want to bring such material out through the congressional investigation?” One of the issues is:

Do we want the congressional investigation to also get into the substance of the Pentagon study? If so, a game plan must be devised for determining what, when, and how information should be fed to the committee.

The next issue is:

If the decision is made to move ahead in these substantive areas, careful consideration should be given to the effect of the credibility fallout on us. For this reason it might be best to stick with specific blunders such as the 1963 coup, the miscalculation on the need of forces, etc.

A note appended to that issue said:

I am sending you a separate Hunt to Colson memorandum which attempts to select the politically damaging material involving the Democratic hierarchy. I personally believe a good deal more material could be developed along those lines.

A fourth memorandum—sent the next day, August 27—goes from Ehrlichman to Colson. It says:

On the assumption that the proposed undertaking by Hunt and Liddy would be carried out and would be successful, I would appreciate receiving from you by next Wednesday a game plan as to how and when you believe the materials should be used.

The “proposed undertaking by Hunt and Liddy” is, of course, the Ellsberg burglary, which in fact took place a week after the memo was sent. “Liddy” was Gordon Liddy, former F.B.I. agent, who worked in the Plumbers and teamed up with Hunt in organizing the Ellsberg burglary. The “game plan” refers to the suggestion in the Young memo of August 26 for a congressional investigation to publicize “the politically damaging material involving the Democratic hierarchy.”

This clear line of evidence showing the motive behind the Plumbers’ operations, to be sure, has been submerged under an ocean of material purporting to relate Hunt and the Plumbers in the Ellsberg burglary to vital considerations of national security. President Nixon

himself set forth the national security argument in a formal statement issued May 22, 1973. His starting point was the publication of the Pentagon Papers by *The New York Times* beginning on June 13, 1971. The President said that the publication constituted “a security leak of unprecedented proportions. . . . Therefore during the week following the Pentagon Papers publication, I approved the creation of a special investigation unit in the White House—which later came to be known as the ‘Plumbers.’” Mr. Nixon indicated that he placed John Ehrlichman in overall charge of the Plumbers, and assigned immediate responsibility to two junior aides, Egil Krogh and David Young. “At about the time the unit was created,” Mr. Nixon said, “Daniel Ellsberg was identified as the person who had given the Pentagon Papers to *The New York Times*. I told Mr. Krogh that as a matter of first priority, the unit should find out about Mr. Ellsberg’s associates and his motives.”

Ehrlichman and Krogh subsequently mentioned four other points which thickened the national security penumbra around the Plumbers. In mid-June, 1971, they said, they had learned from an F.B.I. report that the Pentagon Papers had been delivered to the Russians. Thus, according to Ehrlichman, the purpose of their investigation was extremely serious—to make “a determination of whether there was a spy ring or foreign conspiracy which had taken those top secret documents and delivered them to a foreign enemy.”

Then, they said, the work of the Plumbers was further accelerated and intensified by a “leak” involving the SALT talks which appeared in *The Times*, July 23, 1971. Ehrlichman and Krogh went to see Mr. Nixon about the leak the next day. According to Ehrlichman:

The President by the 24th of July knew that his negotiating position versus the Russians in the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty negotiations were known to the Russians and literally the negotiations had been compromised.

According to Krogh:

The President appeared deeply troubled by the unauthorized disclosure and directed me to expand the work of the unit to cover it. . . . It was in this context that . . . the break-in into the office of Dr. Ellsberg’s psychiatrist took place.

Expanding the unit was necessary for yet another reason, they said. Ehrlichman and Krogh (and almost certainly the President) did not trust the

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F.B.I. Ehrlichman testified to the Ervin committee that "Krogh came to me and said, 'I am having real trouble getting the F.B.I. to move on this.'" Ehrlichman took the matter to John Mitchell, then the attorney general. According to Ehrlichman's testimony, Mitchell indicated that there was "a very tough problem" with F.B.I. Director J. Edgar Hoover, who was supposed to be in touch with Ellsberg's father-in-law, the toymaker Louis Marx. Ehrlichman said the attorney general told him Hoover was taking the position that "interviews of that family are not to take place." "So," Ehrlichman concluded, two men in the Plumbers unit who had "considerable investigative experience" were "assigned to follow up" on leads in the file. Those two men, of course, were Hunt and Liddy.

Finally, as it emerged in the Senate hearings, the Plumbers were said to be on another probe that the President wanted kept secret. Senator Howard Baker in questioning Ehrlichman expressed the feeling that besides the SALT leak and the Pentagon Papers leak, "there is something else there." Ehrlichman's counsel, John Wilson, identified the "something else" as a 1971 probe by the Plumbers. He then produced a letter from Fred Buzhardt, then the counsel to the Defense Department, which forbade testimony on this investigation:

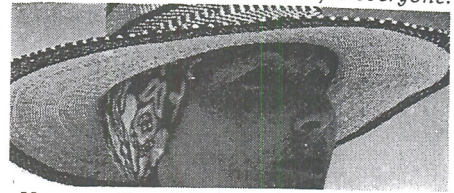
The 1971 investigation about which you inquired . . . does involve the most sensitive national security matters, the public disclosure of which would cause damage to the national security.

For months thereafter, investigative reporters for many of the major papers tried to trace those "sensitive" matters. Jim Squires of *The Chicago Tribune* was the first to hit pay dirt. In January, 1974, he reported the "something else" was a 1971 investigation by David Young of the Plumbers concerning the leak of some National Security Council documents to the columnist Jack Anderson. Young's investigation had led to a Navy yeoman—Charles Radford—on the staff of the National Security Council, and it showed that for several years Radford had been bootlegging information to the office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The material included eyes-only papers prepared by Henry Kissinger for the President, and ran to hundreds of documents. Admiral Thomas Moorer, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, after first denying the whole story, acknowledged that he had received at least two packages of the material sent by Radford.

That story was, of course, highly embarrassing. But clearly it involved no "sensitive national security matters, the public disclosure of which would cause damage to the national security." Before publishing the story, reporters

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from *The Tribune* had checked with the highest available authorities. In his new capacity as White House counsel, Fred Buzhardt told one reporter that nothing he said should be considered a bar to publication of the story. Alexander Haig, the four-star Army general who replaced H. R. Haldeman as White House chief of staff, reacted to the inquiry from *The Tribune* with a comment that truly expressed the view the White House takes of "national security." "This story isn't going to do the country any good," Haig said, "but I don't think it will hurt the President."

Furthermore, an examination of the other top-secret stuff which supposedly gave rise to the operations of the Plumbers shows that it is as empty of true national security content as is the story of yeoman Radford and the Pentagon "spy ring." The SALT "leak" which so upset Mr. Nixon is a supreme case in point. It turns out that the material described in *The Times's* story had previously been passed by Henry Kissinger to the Soviet ambassador in Washington, Anatoly Dobrynin. Publication was, of course, embarrassing to the administration—particularly as it demonstrated to those involved in the talks that the American negotiating team in Helsinki was conducting a dumb show while the real action was at higher levels in Washington and Moscow. But no secrets were communicated—nor was the American position, as Ehrlichman claimed, "compromised." Melvin Laird, who was secretary of defense at the time of the leak, told a group of reporters—on January 30, 1974, just before stepping out of the White House as a counselor to the President—that "I don't think there was anything in that story that the Soviets didn't have." My own research makes it clear that before publishing the story, *The Times* had made sure there was no security break involved.

Finally, the claim that the Pentagon Papers were passed to the Russians is more complicated—but also even more dubious. Nobody who knows Ellsberg well can envisage him as a common spy peddling secrets to the other side. Everything about Ellsberg's pattern of action—his speeches, his writings, and his efforts to work through Robert McNamara, Henry Kissinger, the Kennedys, and Senators Fulbright and McGovern—shows a man trying to turn his country around, not help the other side. Apart from the White House insiders, moreover, the rest of the government did not believe, nor did anyone act as though it was believed, that Ellsberg had spied for the Russians. The C.I.A., in particular, was dubious of that theory. The psychological assessment of Ellsberg prepared for the Plumbers by the agency asserted:



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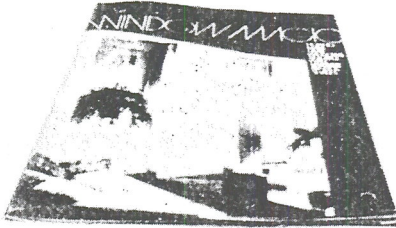
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“... By slow stages, they used the investigation of leaks for a smear campaign...”

There is no suggestion that subject [i.e., Ellsberg] thought anything treasonous in his act. Rather he seemed to be responding to what he deemed a higher order of patriotism. His exclusion of the three volumes of the Papers concerned with the secret negotiations would support this.

The F.B.I., though the original source of the story, was just as skeptical as the C.I.A. The internal memo of August 26, prepared by Young, bears this out. It says: “The F.B.I. is disposed to thinking that Ellsberg is the sole prime mover.” That rather sensible belief was apparently the true reason for White House dissatisfaction with the F.B.I. and for the decision to use Hunt and Liddy for the break-in. The reasons asserted by Ehrlichman in his original testimony—that J. Edgar Hoover was obstructing the F.B.I. investigation because of friendship with Ellsberg's father-in-law, Louis Marx—turned out to be feeble indeed. It developed that Hoover and Marx had met only once. And contrary to Ehrlichman's statement, Marx was interviewed by the bureau soon after the Pentagon Papers began appearing in *The Times*.

One reason there was so little government belief in the assertion that the Pentagon Papers had been passed to the Russians is that the source of that assertion seems to have been very weak. Newspapermen avoided that story like the plague because no one wants to be involved in what looks like the blowing of an undercover agent. But one paper happened upon information suggesting that the source was an American agent inside the Soviet foreign service, and checked with the C.I.A. The C.I.A. director had never heard of the supposed agent. One of his aides acknowledged that there was in fact such an agent, but added that the agency had no confidence in his reporting, and had had none for years.

In the end, it seems very unlikely that the Pentagon Papers were passed to the Russians at all. It seems almost 100 per cent certain that Ellsberg passed nothing to the Russians. My guess is that the man to do that job, if it were done, would be the man who had an interest in connecting Ellsberg with the Russians as part of a political smear operation—E. Howard Hunt.

Not only does the national security argument fail to stand on its merits, it is further compromised by two other major developments. One is the sequence of events which followed the apprehension of the Watergate burglars—notably the attempted cover-up.

Why would senior White House officials have felt obliged to pay hush money for such obscure figures as Hunt, his gun-happy partner Gordon Liddy, and the three Cubans who were nabbed in the attempt on Democratic National Headquarters? That caper did not seem closely tied to the White House.

It happened, however, that Hunt had also pulled the Ellsberg break-in with Liddy and the Cubans. Unless paid off, they could have blown the whistle on that job as well. At that point, it appears, nobody had even dreamed up the national security excuse. So high-level meetings went on all over the White House; and rather than allow what John Mitchell called “the White House horrors” to be discovered, it was decided to pay off the burglars. The Watergate burglars, in other words, were paid hush money to keep quiet about the Ellsberg burglary, which was part of the game plan to re-elect Mr. Nixon.

Then there is the President indicating that he learned about the Ellsberg break-in on March 17, 1973, and much more from John Dean at a White House meeting on March 21, 1973. Ehrlichman has also testified that he talked with the President about the break-in on “20, 21, 22 March, somewhere in there.” So what did Mr. Nixon do? What *didn't* he do?

Well, what he did not do was divulge the information about the burglary of Ellsberg's psychiatrist. Quite the contrary. More than three weeks later, on April 15, 1973, John Dean told the assistant U.S. attorney in Washington about the Ellsberg break-in. Next day, the assistant U.S. attorney, Earl Silbert, notified Henry Petersen, the assistant attorney general in charge of the Criminal Division. On April 18, Petersen telephoned this report to Mr. Nixon. He swears that Nixon said: “I know about that. That is a national security matter. You stay out of that. Your mandate is to investigate Watergate.” Mr. Petersen accepted that order—but then began to brood about it. On April 25 Petersen sent a memo to Attorney General Richard Kleindienst arguing that the government was obliged to reveal the fact of the Ellsberg break-in to the court in Los Angeles. Petersen pushed this point with a force that indicated he would resign if there was any more stalling on the matter. That afternoon, Kleindienst went to see the President and obtained permission to disclose word of the break-in to the judge in the Ellsberg trial, Matthew Byrne. Judge Byrne promptly dismissed the case.

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As to what the President did do, we find Ehrlichman calling Judge Byrne on April 5 to arrange a meeting that very afternoon in San Clemente. At that meeting, Ehrlichman informed Judge Byrne that the President was considering him for the post of director of the F.B.I., and wanted to know whether the judge was interested. The White House, it seems, was offering (improperly) a big plum because it wanted a favor in return. My impression is that the hope was, whatever else happened, Judge Byrne would keep silent about the Ellsberg break-in. Only when that effort failed—when Judge Byrne and the burglars began talking—did Mr. Nixon fall back, in his statement of May 22, 1973, to the national security rationale for the burglary.

I do not mean to say that the President and his entourage were unconcerned about national security "leaks." In fact, they were obsessed by unauthorized news stories. They really and truly believed there was a conspiracy among media, Harvard, and various other patrician institutions to get the President. The anti-Nixon conspirators, they supposed, used leaks of national security material as a major weapon. The Plumbers were set up to reveal and ruin the conspiracy-to-lead which the President and those around him—wrongly, but truly—believed to exist. Then by slow stages, the Plumbers and the men controlling the Plumbers began to use the leak investigation as camouflage for the political smear campaign against the Democratic party. It was a campaign, repeatedly approved at the highest levels in the White House, to discredit the men then thought most likely to be nominated against Nixon in 1972—Kennedy and Muskie. It was carried forward with vigor at the highest levels because at that time—in the summer of 1971—President Nixon looked to have an exceedingly tough race ahead. As Republican prospects improved with the emergence of Senator George McGovern, the burning pressure for the smear campaign eased off. The June 17, 1972, Watergate break-in was a kind of afterglow—a job programmed long before which nobody quite turned off.

But if that last burglary was a stupid, third-rate operation carried out by overzealous subordinates, what lay behind it was deadly serious. What goes under the generic name Watergate is not just a crazy and unnecessary burglary. It represents a serious plot to undermine democratic government in the United States. It was not merely one step further in the long, slow evolution of a secretive imperial Presidency. It was a true expression of what has been the first criminal Presidency in our history.

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