

Plumbers' ^{keep} spy probes role is told

By Jim Squires
and Harry Kelly

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Exclusive

WASHINGTON, Dec. 6—Under supervision of the White House "plumbers," the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Central Intelligence Agency, and Defense Intelligence Agency joined in 1971 in a still mysterious domestic security operation which sources say began as an investigation of a key Pentagon aide suspected of leaking information.

But the operation mushroomed, the sources said, until the plumbers had what one official termed "incredible" access to a flood of intelligence information, including some of the country's most sensitive espionage secrets.

Administration sources claiming familiarity with the probe insisted that disclosure would lead to the uncovering of several "legitimate" national security matters.

ALL ARE DESCRIBED as cloak and dagger plots involving United States espionage against the Soviet Union, some thru the use of foreign contacts.

But some Watergate investigators contend the national security argument—which the White House reportedly made to special prosecutors in an unsuccessful effort to end the investigation of the plumbers' activities—is only an effort to protect such key former White House aides as John Ehrlichman and Charles Colson from prosecution.

Watergate investigators—

none of whom seem to have been briefed on all details—believe the still secret operation is the "missing link" in the Watergate investigation.

SOME HOPE Egil [Bud] Krogh, the former White House aide who headed the plumbers, will be able to provide the final pieces of a puzzle they speculate would add new dimensions to the Watergate scandal.

Krogh, who was assigned to head the plumbers by former Presidential assistant John Ehrlichman, has pleaded guilty to conspiracy in the plumbers' burglary of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office. He has promised to testify in the case.

"Krogh is a time bomb," said an informed government official. "The White House does not want him or anyone else in the plumbers operation to testify."

CONFUSION OVER the still secret plumbers probe—often referred to by President Nixon in public statements as a legitimate national security matter—has led Watergate probers to suggest that the national security argument is a cover designed to keep the plumbers from standing trial in the Ellsberg burglary case.

Others suggest the White House is attempting to hide even more explosive investigative antics by the plumbers

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Plumbers' espionage probes bared

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and possibly domestic intelligence activity by the CIA.

Informed sources say some investigators briefed on the matter can find no clear link between the plumbers' investigation—as outlined by the White House—and the variety of national security secrets the White House says it is protecting.

NONE OF THE sources seemed to agree on any single intelligence operation; each had apparently been briefed on a different case. Based on these sources, the White House is trying to keep secret the following:

- The identity of a middle level Defense Department official, who, because of his key intelligence role, was suspected of leaking national security information. Sources say the man is still in government but is no longer in his sensitive role.

Sources declined to name the Defense Department official but described him as a middle level military officer whose duties gave him access to highly classified intelligence secrets. The probe of his activities lasted from sometime in the spring to December of 1971 when, as one source put it, the problem was "isolated."

- The activities of a "backdoor spy," a top-ranking official of a foreign government who has been providing the U.S. with intelligence information on the Soviet Union.

- The role of at least three

Soviet intelligence sources, including one who has been providing the U.S. with information for a decade.

- That the plumbers had access to intelligence information being gathered by foreign governments on the Soviets.

Administration sources contend the secret plumbers investigation of the official began as the result of news leaks.

Some of the leaks—the Pentagon Papers, the U. S. position on the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks and U. S. strategy in the India-Pakistan conflict—have been made public.

But administration sources contend that others—including one which they said cost the life of a foreign spy in U. S. employ—have not.

IT WAS THIS so far undisclosed leak, they said, which prompted the probe of the Defense Department official using agents of the FBI and the CIA and Defense Intelligence Agency personnel, including J. Fred Buzhardt, who is now special Watergate counsel for the President. Buzhardt, the sources say, is among the White House officials advising the President against making the probe public.

Other Nixon supporters, however, suggest disclosure would help President Nixon by showing that he had legitimate cause to set up the controversial plumbers, some of whom were later involved in the Watergate burglary.

The national security aspect has surfaced numerous times in the public testimony of administration officials before various investigative bodies. The testimony of both Ehrlichman and Elliot Richardson, who became attorney general during the height of Watergate controversy, pointed to other plumbers activities which have not been disclosed.

TESTIFYING BEFORE the Senate Judiciary Committee, Richardson told of one "national security" project which he said the CIA contended must remain classified because it would prejudice the life of an intelligence agent.

Sources said Richardson was referring to the "backdoor intelligence source"—the foreign official who had been passing intelligence information gathered by his own government to the U. S. At least one official said a so far undisclosed leak had threatened to compromise the agent.

In public testimony before the Senate Watergate committee, Ehrlichman cited at least two other "national security matters" he could not discuss. One related directly to the Pentagon Papers situation and the other was the mysterious secret investigation about which Committee Chairman Sam Ervin [D., N. C.] and Sen. Howard Baker [R., Tenn.], the co-chairman, were later briefed by the White House.

ONE RANKING administra-

tion official confirmed reports that the "national security matters" related to Ellsberg involved an allegation that the Soviet embassy here had received a version of the Pentagon Papers from Ellsberg before they were made public.

That the Soviets actually received any documents from Ellsberg has never been confirmed.

Administration spokesmen contend that the White House feared disclosure of its own sources of information that the Soviets had received the documents.

THE WHITE House also feared, the spokesmen said, disclosure that the plumbers wanted to ask British intelligence to try to confirm thru its sources allegations that Ellsberg had been in contact with a Soviet agent.

As in the case of the alleged delivery of documents by Ellsberg, that allegation was never formally brought against Ellsberg or confirmed by independent sources.

Watergate probes have been searching for a common threat that ties all the national security concerns together, but reportedly have been unsuccessful.

AT THE SAME time, Watergate committee investigators reportedly have been unable to establish a link between the suspected leak in the Defense Department and the mysterious espionage antics that are considered so sensitive.