

Plumbing Howard Hunt, dimly

COMPULSIVE SPY: *The Strange Career of E. Howard Hunt*, by Tad Szulc (Viking, \$5.95).

By Jack Schnedler

IN A SENSE, E. Howard Hunt deserves the thanks of a grateful nation. But for his almost comically bungled handling of the Watergate caper, we might still be unaware of the manifold felonies of the Nixon administration.

This Keystone Krooks quality is the more amusing side of Hunt, the mysterious former CIA operative with the penchant for disguises and high living, who played out his unfulfilled fantasies in more than 40 semi-autobiographical spy novels.

However, the other side of Hunt is not in the least laughable. A right-wing ideologist, he also had that bent of mind in-

dispensable to any subversion of an open society — he believed in the sanctity of orders from on high.

He was an Eichmann of the Nixon White House, and his testimony before the Senate Watergate Committee might have served as apologia for a Nazi technocrat: "My 26-year record of service to this country predisposed me to accept orders and instructions without question and without debate."

TAD SZULC, until last year a correspondent for the New York Times, probes the shadows of this long career as a spy, shedding an uneven light. Szulc admits at the start that it is only a sketch, "a reconstruction, from a distance, about a man whom I find fascinating in the context of our time."

Szulc met Hunt only once, during the planning for the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961, and he was unable to interview

him in prison before writing this book. So "Compulsive Spy" is a second-and third-hand effort, more speculative than substantial. Too often we are told that Hunt "probably would have done" such-and-such, and this guessing game is nearly fatal to the book's credibility, as they say in Washington.

In light of the new reports of spying by the "plumbers" on the Joint Chiefs of Staff, it is interesting to note Szulc's theory that Hunt and colleague G. Gordon Liddy may have taken part in other "black" operations that remain secret. The \$200,000 or more channeled to Hunt from Republican coffers may have bought his silence on these other deeds, Szulc suggests.

HUNT IS NOW a broken figure, provisionally under a 35-year prison sentence, his wife

killed in a Chicago plane crash apparently while carrying some of the money from the White House. In Szulc's frequently gauzy portrayal, we see a spy who couldn't come in from the cold, a spy who retired unwillingly from the CIA and found a non-clandestine life to be empty, a spy who eagerly enlisted in the "plumbers."

At book's end, Szulc also shows us a spy of total amorality, except to himself. He quotes the opening epigraph of Hunt's latest novel:

"It is in the political agent's interest to betray all the parties who use him and to work for them all at the same time, so that he may move freely and penetrate everywhere."

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