

More Willie Loman Than Alger Hiss

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Reviewed by
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The reviewer, a Washington Post reporter who covered the Watergate scandals, is co-author of "All the President's Men," to be published in June.

E. Howard Hunt Jr. is to the Watergate scandal as the assassination of that archduke was to World War I: much discussed, catalytic, apparently essential, a product of large forces but still not understood.

Hunt was always drawn to excitement, to the unusual: writing, travel, the CIA, wealth and the White House. But there is more to Hunt's life than that and Tad Szulc goes a long way toward unraveling it in "Compulsive Spy: The Strange Career of E. Howard Hunt."

To go further may be impossible. As Szulc shows, we cannot trust Hunt whose imagination, Szulc says, was "overheated" and if he ever writes his own Watergate story, it will probably be filled with that sort of bureaucratic and upper-mil-

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COMPULSIVE SPY: The Strange Career of E. Howard Hunt. By Tad Szulc.
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class deceit that encompasses his life.

Hunt is important because without him there may have been no Watergate scandal. Hunt and people like him, Szulc shows, are products of the Cold War and the "Industrial-intelligence complex" of private security

firms. Without the Hunts there might have been no one to carry out the plans hatched in the White House and office of former Attorney General John Mitchell. So understanding the Watergate first involves stripping down the participants

See BOOKS, B4, Col. 2

BOOKS, From B1

from image to reality, Hunt, generally referred to as a CIA "agent," was one only in the loosest sense.

He was a political propagandist who handled paperwork for some 21 years with the CIA, often in obscure foreign capitals, taking the raw, dull and inadequate reports of part-time mercenaries, chatting with the local police chiefs, then composing something that might sound important at headquarters. Through a judicious selection of material on Hunt, the Watergate scandal, his own knowledge of the intelligence bureaucracy and

some new research, Szulc details Hunt's basic character. He was not just a dirty trickster of the burglary of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist, the forger of cables alleging President Kennedy's involvement in the 1963 assassination of Diem in Vietnam, and the blackmailer of the White House for hush money.

He is also a self-promoter, a social climber seen trying to wangle an association with Howard Hughes' financial empire or offering helicopters to the Uruguayan president for assistance in keeping his cushy job as CIA station chief, or puffing

his role in the Bay of Pigs invasion.

Many people remember the more contrite Howard Hunt of the Watergate hearings on television. Szulc rightly recalls Hunt as he appeared before Judge John Sirica for sentencing in March 1973—when the Watergate had not yet burst open. His slick, deceitful statement blamed the press in part for his conviction.

"My motives were not evil," he said, claiming that he meant no harm to any person or property. "The real victims of the Watergate conspiracy," he told the judge "are the conspirators themselves."

Hunt probably sees himself as the martyr of Watergate, caught and tormented in a spiritual and physical hell. A friend of Hunt's told me in the weeks after the break-in that "Howard wants to become the Alger Hiss of the political right." Szulc, instead, offers us Hunt as the Willie Loman or perhaps at best the Jay Gatsby of Watergate, a somewhat pathetic, overstriver used to diddling everyone.

Hunt is, in actuality, one of the little men of Watergate, which after all was a little project, scaled down

from a \$1 million budget to \$250,000. The work and the personalities were cut-rate. Hunt was the spooky, not clandestine; manipulative, not ruthless. His forgery was done with a razor blade and the Xerox machine.

Yet the conspiracy he helped create has consumed him, probably more than most. He lost his wife in a plane crash, he was fired from his jobs and he went to jail.

Szulc avoids the temptation to psychoanalyze, attributing Hunt's fall not to plan but just to a loss of the "precious distinction between fantasy and reality." Szulc plays with the idea of spying as a compulsion, but he does not go quite far enough. Is spying a kind of fever? Or was it to Hunt the ultimate in glamor? An act of obsessive will? Simple cynicism? A test of his power to practice deception? Or a test of his fierce patience to wait for his moment in history?

As for that moment, what made it all come together needs further examination. This should not be the last book on Howard Hunt.