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### And After All This, We Still Don't Know

By Bruce Bioassat

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In all the endless hurly-burly over Watergate, one crucial element has, astonishingly, been lost sight of. Final crucial responsibility for the June, 1972 bugging and burglary of the Democrats' Watergate headquarters never has been fixed. And it now seems evident that even President Nixon and some of his former key aides do not know.

Along the way, the President, his onetime counsel John Dean and others had some quite specific ideas about how the critical guidance for the break-in might have been given. But they were never altogether certain, and seemed either unwilling or unable — or both — to pin down the blame.

We must remember that for our own guidance we have only the edited, transcribed versions of conversations on Watergate which the President held with Dean and others over a period of many months, starting in this instance from Sept. 15, 1972. Obviously, there were earlier conversations but analysts and the public have no access to them.

In summary, from a reading of pertinent passages in the released transcripts, it can be said that Mr. Nixon and others came to feel — after much searching discussion — that White House pressures exerted by former aide Charles Colson and/or Gordon Strachan (acting clearly in the name of Mr. Nixon's top aide, H.R. Haldeman), may have provided the decisive impetus for the Watergate break-in.

Many times the name of Re-election Committee chairman John Mitchell is brought in, but in early conversations it is largely dismissed. Later on, however, there is a judgment that, somewhat weary at battling (so he has always said) bizarre intelligence-gathering plans, he may at long last have bowed to represented White House insistence and said "go ahead," without a clear idea what that would mean.

On March 21, 1973, the day the President improperly describes as the first time he had any knowledge of real White House involvement in Watergate and coverup, Dean told him that in February, 1972, Colson telephoned Jeb Magruder, a top executive at the re-election committee where intelligence work was centered for certain purposes, and said:

"You all either fish or cut bait. This is absurd to have these guys over there and not using them. If you are not going to use them, I may use them."

Later in that chat, the President says Colson "may well have been the trigger man where he just called up and said now look here Jeb go out and get that information. And (G. Gordon) Liddy and (E. Howard) Hunt went out and got it at that time."

At this juncture in the March 21 talks, Dean disclosed for the first time that Liddy and Hunt both were in Colson's office when the call to Magruder was made. He told Mr. Nixon he was so informed by Colson himself.

Liddy, of course, was an intelligence gatherer for the committee and Hunt had a White House cubbyhole office as an operative hired by Colson for the so-called "plumbers" unit.

Liddy sometimes is portrayed as feeling unused and, in Nixon aide H.R. Haldeman's words "pushing to get something done" — and as saying on other occasions that he was pressed "without mercy" by Magruder to dredge up far more intelligence about the Democrats than the White House was getting.

Here enters the added pressure on Magruder from Haldeman's top helper and tie to the committee, Gordon Strachan. In the discussions, Mr. Nixon and others try to weigh its effect along with Colson's.

Haldeman, earlier portrayed as dissatisfied with committee intelligence and urging Strachan to so advise Magruder, sees the possible link to a Watergate bugging decision. On March 27, 1973, he tells the President Strachan's message to Magruder conveyed the idea both Haldeman and Mr. Nixon wanted more information. He adds that Magruder told Mitchell, who said "OK, if they say it, go ahead," and suggests that by this chain of events, with Liddy and Hunt the real operatives, the Watergate bugging and burglary was brought about. Yet none of the top men seems sure who besides Liddy and Hunt knew or approved the specific plan — if anyone did.

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