

G.O.P. and 'Spy' Plot

Nixon's Strategy Is Seen as Revealing Basic Views About Voters and the Press

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 18—The essence of the Administration's recent counterattack to charges that some of President Nixon's assistants created or at least condoned a network of political espionage and disruption has been to denounce the charges and the newspapers that print them without explicitly discussing or denying them.

Behind this strategy lie two assumptions that tell much about the Administration's perceptions of the voters and the newspapers that serve them. Judging by recent interviews with Mr. Nixon's aides, these assumptions seem to be widely shared in his inner circle.

News
Analysis

The first is that the President himself has yet to be directly linked—and is not likely to be so linked—to any of the allegations of wrongdoing. At the moment, the White House feels, the alleged conspiracy is perceived by most of the public as a distant and even amateurish intrigue far removed from the Oval Office, and thus a denial or even discussion of the charges by the White House would give those charges undeserved visibility and currency.

The second assumption is that the public—softened up by three years of speeches from Vice President Agnew—has less than total confidence that what it reads and hears—particularly in the so-called Eastern or "Establishment" media—is true and undistorted by political prejudice. Hence, the recent Administration attacks on The Washington Post, which has been giving the corruption allegations front-page treatment.

Techniques Revealed

The techniques that flow from these assumptions were revealed two days ago after suggestions in The Post—and assertions in Time magazine—that Dwight L. Chapin, Mr. Nixon's appointments secretary, and Gordon Strachan, an aide to Presidential Assistant H. R. Haldeman, had recruited Donald H. Segretti, a 31-year-old lawyer, to organize a campaign of disruption and distortion.

Both Ronald L. Ziegler, the

White House press secretary, and Clark MacGregor, the Republican campaign director, described the allegations as "hearsay" and "guilt by association" and condemned The Post as, in effect, a willing agent of the McGovern campaign. But neither man further discussed or flatly denied the allegations.

A variation on the technique occurred this morning when Mr. Ziegler was asked about an article in The New York Times that said that telephone calls linked to Mr. Segretti had been made to an official named in the Watergate bugging case, to the White House, and to Mr. Chapin.

Mr. Ziegler treated The Times more gently than he had The Post, but left the clear impression that he did not think much of the article. "I have no way of knowing how The Times received its information, or the accuracy of it," he said in part.

No Denial of Link

In addition, the press secretary asserted, "no one here at the White House directed" activities involving "sabotage, spying, espionage." This sounded like the denial of a link between Mr. Chapin and Mr. Segretti that Mr. Ziegler had refused to furnish two days ago. But when newsmen asked him on three separate occasions this morning whether he meant to deny flatly a Chapin-Segretti link, he refused to do so; indeed, at one point, he said he did not intend to go beyond "my position which was offered to you the other day."

The object of all this inquiry—Mr. Chapin himself—is known to and well liked by most newsmen covering the White House. He is candid and friendly, and he is an obedient and loyal junior staff man.

However, Mr. Chapin has not made himself available, answering all questions with a "no comment." Repeated requests to senior White House aides to set forth the full story, as they see it, have gone unanswered. This leaves the field to Mr. Ziegler, who appears increasingly uncomfortable with questions about Mr. Chapin and Mr.

Segretti.

Principal Tactic

At the moment, the White House spokesmen's principal tactic seems to be to create the impression, and have the public believe, that the charges of espionage are no more than stories printed in newspapers—and not very reliable newspapers at that.

"Do you know why we're not uptight about the press and the espionage business?" one White House aide—not Mr. Ziegler—asked rhetorically the other day. "Because we believe that the public believes that the Eastern press really is what Agnew said it was—elitist, anti-Nixon, and ultimately pro-McGovern."

The irony is that Mr. Agnew himself has adopted a low profile and is saying little about the press. But his allies in the White House freely admit that the seeds of suspicion he sowed in times past are bearing fruit today.