

Mitchell and White House

Ran Coverup, Probers Say

U.S. Has Evidence of Top-Level Plan to Block Watergate Investigation

By Seymour M. Hersh
N.Y. Times Service

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Government investigators said they now have evidence that high-ranking officials of the White House and the Committee for the Re-election of the President conspired after the June, 1972, Watergate break-in to arrange a careful cover story designed to obstruct the federal investigation.

The investigators said the obstruction of justice was co-ordinated by President Nixon's two closest advisers, H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman, who resigned Monday, and former Attorney General John N. Mitchell, who headed the re-election committee at the time.

Three other former White House aides, Jeb Stuart Magruder, a special assistant to Mr. Nixon, Frederick C. LaRue, another special assistant, and John W. Dean III, the President's counsel, were also involved in the coverup attempt, investigators said.

MEETINGS

The coverup was formulated during secret meetings held at the re-election headquarters here in late June, according to investigators.

The basic scheme was said to have called for all of those involved in the operation to deny any knowledge of it, and for the re-election committee to issue public statements to that effect.

In essence, investigators said, everyone involved in the operation repeatedly lied — to federal investigators, prosecutors, other White House officials, and finally, to Mr. Nixon.

INDICT

All six men are expected to be indicted by the federal grand jury now hearing testimony on the Watergate incident, sources close to the case said.

At least four other persons

also were involved in the coverup, and are now under investigation by the grand jury, the sources said.

They are Dwight L. Chapin, the President's former appointments secretary; Gordon Strachan, a Haldeman assistant; Herbert L. Porter, who worked for Herbert Klein's information office, and Kenneth W. Parkinson, a Washington lawyer who was hired by the re-election committee shortly after the June 17 break-in.

In addition, investigators

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said, there were many others who were — in the words of one source — “seduced by the operation.”

The grand jury and senate investigating committee are now trying to determine, among other things, whether those persons knew the full implications of their roles in the coverup.

PAYMENTS

The scheme, as allegedly worked out by Ehrlichman, Haldeman, Mitchell and Dean, included payments to the arrested defendants, promises of executive clemency, a series of public denials, and arrangements with Magruder and Porter to perjure themselves during the trial of the seven Watergate defendants.

The additional funds needed for the payoffs, sources said, were collected by Her-

bert W. Kalmbach, Mr. Nixon's personal lawyer who also served as a chief campaign money-raiser.

Although Kalmbach made a special effort to raise the cash after the men were arrested, the sources added, it has not been determined whether he was aware of its ultimate use. He, too, is now under investigation by the grand jury. The White House said yesterday that the lawyer is no longer handling legal matters for Mr. Nixon.

The account of the coverup provided to the New York Times was subsequently confirmed and corroborated in interviews during the last 24 hours with a variety of officials and attorneys involved in the case.

Perhaps the grossest fabrication, sources said, was the coordinated account provided to the federal prosecutors, and used by them as a bulwark in the subsequent Watergate trial, of the initial rationale behind the cash payments to G. Gordon Liddy, one of those convicted of bugging the Democratic National Committee offices.

The government was told by a number of re-election committee officials that the \$100,000 given to Liddy was to pay ten different intelligence agents \$1000 a month each for ten months in 1972 to find out if anti-Republican demonstrations were planned.

“That was a complete fabrication,” one investigator said. “Just a complete lie.”

Hugh W. Sloan Jr., treasurer of the re-election committee who gave the cash to Liddy, according to investigators, was the only key official who apparently chose not to participate in the coverup, causing his superiors to alter some details of the agreed-upon story.

Sloan had been urged to commit perjury during the Watergate trial by testifying that he gave Liddy and his associates only \$40,000 in 100 bills rather than the \$235,000 that was actually provided, informed sources said.

On at least three occasions, Sloan has told investigators that Magruder and LaRue attempted to pressure him into changing his story.

Sloan confirmed the account in a telephone inter-

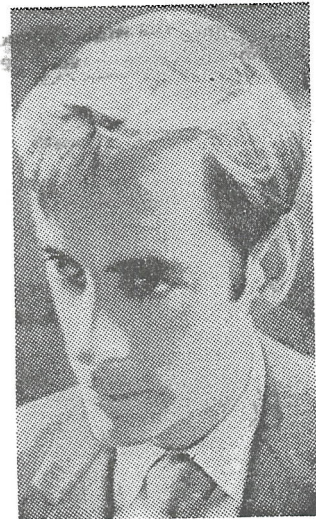
view Monday night but refused to discuss the matter, saying that he would talk only to the appropriate officials.

CONCERN

Investigators said, however, that Sloan had unsuccessfully attempted, in the days following the first public disclosure of the Watergate break-in, to tell both Ehrlichman and Haldeman of his concern over the re-election committee's role in the bugging.

“Sloan made incredible efforts to get word to the President or somebody about what he knew was wrong,” one source noted. “They all told him to go back to the committee.”

His first attempt to tell higher ups of the impend-



AP Wirephoto

HUGH SLOAN

The campaign treasurer

ing scandal, investigators said, came six days after the break-in, during an evening party aboard a chartered vessel in the Potomac River.

The party was in honor of Colonel Vernon C. Coffey of the Army, a White House military aide who was being reassigned to the National War College, and many White House and re-election committee officials attended.

By this time, one source recalled, Sloan “had begun to read this stuff in newspapers about \$100 bills floating around, and he really began to get scared.”

“He thought his fingerprints might be on the bills and, he also thought that if the White House didn't deal

with the problem quickly it could hurt the President," the source said.

Sloan approached Chapin, who was then Mr. Nixon's appointments secretary and a Haldeman protege, and asked for an appointment with the White House chief of staff. Investigators also say that he sought out Kenneth R. Cole Jr., then a member of Ehrlichman's staff, and arranged for an appointment the next day with Ehrlichman, the President's domestic adviser.

CONVERSATION

According to the investigators, Sloan said that the following conversation, using roughly these words, took place during his White House meeting with Ehrlichman:

Sloan: "I think we've got some real problems at the committee in connection with this bugging of the Democrats."

Ehrlichman: "That's a problem you have over there. I don't want to know any facts; it's none of my business. If you have a personal problem about it, get a lawyer."

Sloan: "Let me tell you what I think may be going on over there."

Ehrlichman: "I don't want to be told any details."

Sloan, sources said, never did get any appointment with Haldeman, and he was, in effect, told by Chapin to mind his own business.

But according to investigators, at precisely the moment when Ehrlichman was telling Sloan he wanted no "details," and Haldeman was refusing to see him, both men were already involved in developing the initial cover story.

"Everybody knew that Sloan was the fly in the ointment," one investigator said. "Sloan kept them a little bit honest, to his undying credit."

A number of sources cautioned that the investigations have yet to turn up—as one put it—"a nice, tidy little meeting where they all sat down and planned how to do it."

"Haldeman and Ehrlichman were running the cover-up," one investigator said

during an interview. He added that it was not known whether the two presidential aides were aware of the Watergate bugging operation before the arrests.

"We don't know whether Nixon to this day knows what really happened," the

investigator added. "He really thinks they're clean."

Sometime in late June, investigators said, Mr. Nixon assigned Dean to investigate the possibility of White House involvement in the bugging operation. In his speech Monday night, Mr. Nixon implied that his own investigator had lied to him.

"I don't think Dean had any prior knowledge of the bugging," one investigator said. "He agreed to go along with the coverup. Once he found out how many people would be hurt, he was convinced that the scandal would really damage the country."

The investigator gave this paraphrase of what he said was the approach used by the two high-level presidential aides to the counsel when the question of the bugging was initially discussed:

"Now, John, we knew that the President is asking you to do this investigation. But the president doesn't know anything about all of this, and we do. Consider in your mind the consequences of the whole story coming out, and what it would do to the country."

The investigator said that after listening to the explanation from his superiors, "Dean went into the bag and falsified his report to the president."

Dean's subsequent release of information to various newspapers in the last two weeks about the involvement of higher-ups was based in part on his anger, the investigator said, upon learning that Haldeman and Ehrlichman had "given him all this bull about wanting to protect the presidency, when really they were just protecting their necks."