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White House Considered Reprisal Cuts Against MIT

By Thomas O'Toole
Washington Post Staff Writer

The White House considered cutting off all federal research funds to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology as a political reprisal against its people and policies.

The reprisals were considered in October of 1971 and April of 1972, but were never acted upon at least partly because of a total lack of support from the federal agencies funding the research, heated opposition to the idea from the Pentagon or a combination of both.

The idea of political reprisal against MIT was discussed in two White House memoranda published in yesterday's issue of Science magazine, editorial arm of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. The first memo was sent from former White House aide Jon Huntsman to then presidential assistants George P. Shultz, Henry A. Kissinger and John D. Ehrlichman. The second went from Ehrlichman to President Nixon.

Science quotes the April, 1972, memo from Ehrlichman to the President in part as follows:

"You should give guidance on these specifics:

"—Cut out the DOD Department of Defense) laser program (40 million dollars); Order no further funding of non-defense programs as of June 30, 1972 (31 million dollars); Cancel non-defense contracts now ($31 million less cancellation penalties)."

Ehrlichman is also reported as writing:

"The $31 million (non-defense funds) is fair game and will be identified by contract number immediately. The best method is to order no further funding, rather than cancellation, to avoid penalty claims and lawsuits. Such an order would actually stop funds as of June 30 (71 days from now)."

In response to the Science

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story, the White House said it could find no record of Ehrlichman's memo or Huntsman's memo. The White House said it would continue to search its files for both memos and did not issue a denial that they had been written.

The Huntsman memo was labeled "confidential sensitive" and discusses a plan of political reprisal against MIT. raised by President Nixon as far back as 1970. This memo is addressed to Shultz, Kissinger and Ehrlichman by Huntsman, who was White House staff secretary at the time.

"Upon reading the attached article which appeared in the Wall Street Journal October 12, 1971 (about the ABM debate and the scientific community)," the Huntsman memo reads, "it was requested that you report on the progress that has been made on the President's directive of a year ago to cut back on MIT's subsidy in view of Wiesner's antidefense bias."

The Wiesner referred to by Huntsman is Dr. Jerome B. Wiesner, president of MIT and onetime science adviser to the late President Kennedy who led academic opposition to development of the antiballistic missile. Wiesner argued publicly that the ABM wouldn't even work.

Science speculates that the reprisals against MIT were a personal attack on Wiesner, whose name appeared on the White House "enemies list" released by former White House counsel John W. Dean, III. Wiesner has long been identified as a close friend of the Kennedy family and has served as adviser to the late Sen. Robert F. Kennedy and Sen. Edward M. Kennedy.

Other sources said that White House reprisals might have been directed against MIT for more reasons than Wiesner. These sources said the White House was disenchanted with MIT because of their active student protests, their faculty attacks on the Vietnam war and their agreement to rid MIT of the Draper Laboratory over its weapons research.

"There were a lot of pained expressions over at the White House over why the Pentagon was dealing with MIT," one source recalled. "The White House was truly furious when MIT decided to spin off the Draper Laboratory back in 1969."

While most sources said they never saw the memos published by Science, they all felt that the idea of reprisals against MIT never went beyond the White House. One source said he felt certain that former Defense Secretary Melvin Laird was instrumental in killing the idea.

"There's a lot of smarts up at MIT," said this source, who held a high Pentagon post under Laird, "and we had to get our work done."