

Mystery Project By the 'Plumbers'

Washington

John D. Ehrlichman said yesterday that the secret White House intelligence unit undertook a mission in 1971 so important to "national security" that it justified President Nixon's efforts to hide the group's existence.

Ehrlichman, the former assistant to the President for domestic matters, did not disclose the nature of the mission but told the Senate Watergate committee that it was not "inherently" related to the Watergate conspiracy.

But he said that previous efforts by government and Senate investigators to learn the truth about the Watergate case might have jeopardized the secrecy of the highly sensitive mission.

G. Gordon Liddy and E. Howard Hunt, two of the Watergate conspirators, once worked for the White House special intelligence unit — called the "plumbers" because it originally was set up to plug leaks of government secrets.

Ehrlichman and his lawyer, John J. Wilson, told the Senate Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities that they were under specific White House orders not to disclose the nature of the 1971 mission.

APPROVAL

But Ehrlichman said he would be willing to discuss it in a secret session of the committee if the White House approved, and Wilson offered to seek the approval if the senators would guarantee that they would not disclose the information later.

"Leaks out of your committee have been colossal," Wilson declared.

Frank A. Sturgis, another Watergate conspirator, was quoted in the New York Times earlier this year as saying that he worked under

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Hunt on a 1971 investigation of illicit drug traffic into the U.S. from Mexico, Paraguay and Panama.

ASSASSINATION

In addition, there were published reports last spring that the "plumbers" were suspected of engaging in il-

legal measures, perhaps even an aborted assassination plan, aimed at Brigadier General Omar Torrijos Herrera, the military ruler of Panama.

Ehrlichman did not refer to any of these reports yesterday, but said that the matter was so "heavily weighed in favor of national security" that he was confi-

dent the senators would agree with him if they learned the details.

The injection of a note of mystery came in Ehrlichman's third full day at the witness table in the televised hearings into the burglary of the Democratic headquarters in the Watergate complex and its subsequent coverup.

Ehrlichman testified that he and Mr. Nixon were convinced last summer, on the basis of oral reports from John W. Dean III, the deposed White House legal counsel, that no one at the executive mansion had been involved in the Watergate break-in.

He clashed at length with several members of the panel whose questions evidenced deep skepticism about Ehrlichman's consistent denials of involvement in anything connected to a Watergate coverup.

"It didn't dawn on me that there was a coverup going on," Ehrlichman insisted.

Senator Howard H. Baker Jr. of Tennessee, the Republican vice chairman, pressed Ehrlichman for some explanation of the secret 1971 "plumbers" operation. He said that the issue was "terribly important" because it bore on the President's conduct after the June 17, 1972, Watergate break-in.

I need to know whether or not "we're playing games," Baker told the witness.

"We are not playing games," Ehrlichman replied.

How, the senator pressed on, could the committee be certain? He said that the matter "won't float" on Ehrlichman's assurances alone, and that the panel seemed to have been put in "an untenable position" by the White House restrictions on discussion of the "plumbers" mission.

Wilson said that he did not even know himself what the substance of the matter was, but that he would seek White House permission for Ehrlichman's secret testimony on it — or, alternatively, for a briefing by someone else — if the closed meeting was limited to the senators and if they guaranteed that the information would go no farther." Baker said he would have to consider that option.

New York Times JAMES M. NAUGHTON