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Watergate: The View from Jail

Life behind bars has not been kind to Convicted Watergate Conspirator E.

Howard Hunt Jr. Only five months into his provisional 35-year sentence, he has become noticeably thinner—25 lbs. by his own measurement—his hair grayer, his eyes listless, and the muscles of his left calf have slightly atrophied as the result of a mild heart attack. He emerges from prison only to tell authorities what he knows about the Watergate breakin; so far, he has testified 19 times before grand juries and congressional committees. For security reasons, on those occasions his legs are put in irons and his wrists are manacled to a chain round his waist. Much of the time, however, Hunt broods bitterly in his cell. Last week TIME Correspondent David Beckwith visited him and sent this report:

E. Howard Hunt shows little reticence nowadays in talking about those whom he considers responsible for the Watergate raid. "I guess it's obvious now," says Hunt, "that the Watergate thing was planned by a small group of people—Mitchell, Magruder, maybe a few others. We were just legmen in that operation following decisions made by others, and yet we're the only ones who have suffered from it so far."

The fate of Mitchell's deputy Jeb Stuart Magruder, who last week pleaded guilty to obstructing justice, particularly irritates Hunt. Says he: "I saw a picture of Magruder taking a river raft trip, visiting London, preparing to hit the lecture circuit and make some money." He shakes his head, looking down.

"I can't for the life of me understand.

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Here are the prime conspirators walking around on the streets, free on bond.

But there's no end in sight for me. I think it's ironic and inequitable."

Hunt still justifies his participation in Watergate and the plumbing activities on grounds of national security. His view of national security, in turn, derives from his unabashed right-wing politics and his almost paranoid suspicion of anyone who criticizes U.S. policies. The break-in at the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist, he says, was DPI not to discredit Ellsberg personally but to find out whether Ellsberg "might be a controlled agent for the Sovs [Soviets]." Says Hunt: "He spent a period at Cambridge, and a lot of defectors like [British Double Agent Kim] Philby and others were from Cambridge."

Farfetched. Watergate, similarly, evolved from a mixture of rumors and anxieties about security. Hunt still clings to his rather farfetched explanation that Fellow Conspirator G. Gordon Liddy told him "that he had heard from reliable authority that Castro funds were going to the Democrats in hopes that a rapprochement with Cuba would be effected by a successful Democratic presidential candidate. The main purpose of the Watergate break-in was a photographic job—to get lists of contributors and check if any were blind fronts for Castro."

Hunt is not convinced that the discovery of the break-in team at the Democratic National Committee headquarters was an accident; he thinks he smells a trap. "There were just too many fishy things that occurred. What was the [plainclothes] mod squad doing out on the street some two-three hours after they were supposed to be off duty?"

Hunt also suspects that Alfred C. Baldwin, who was the break-in team's lookout and who monitored the bug from a Howard Johnson's motel room across the street, might have been a double agent.

"Baldwin was a very convenient fellow. He had a girl friend at the D.N.C., and he somehow came up with the floor plan of the D.N.C. headquarters. He was never checked out at all—McCord got him off a job-wanted list of former FBI agents. He didn't do his job; he didn't alert anybody about the police until they were running around the D.N.C. with their guns drawn."

As for James W. McCord Jr., the conspirator who first started spilling the story of high officials' involvement, Hunt now portrays him as a bungler, "an electronic hitchhiker who shouldn't have been allowed on our operation."

He says the bugging apparatus that McCord had bought was faulty and secondhand, even though McCord billed Liddy for new equipment. While he was inside the Watergate, McCord turned down his walkie-talkie or turned it off, apparently to conserve batteries. "There were just too many things that went wrong for them all to be coincidence," says Hunt darkly.

Hunt vehemently denies that he and his wife were attempting to shake down the White House for hush money. "Every time I hear the word blackmail it makes my blood boil. It wasn't blackmail or hush money ... It was maintenance payments and lawyers' fees, the same sort of arrangement that the CIA gives its agents who are captured. We had no silence to sell. We knew the grand jury would be impaneled following the trial and that we would be immunized and forced to talk. Just because John Dean thought he was paying hush money doesn't make it necessarily so. I never heard the term Executive clemency until it started appearing in the news media."

No Concentration. Hunt, who once had five automobiles, riding horses and live-in servants, now leads a simple existence. At Danbury the prisoners are awakened at 6 in their barracks-style rooms and immediately make their beds, shower, shave and breakfast. At 8 Hunt reports to work in the prison library. At 10:30 there is a 90-minute lunch break, then another three and one-half hours in the comfortable library job. From 3:30 to 5:30 is dinner and free time, when Hunt attempts to answer sympathetic mail.

"Every day you're in prison seems four times as long as a normal day.

We have a so-called law library at Danbury, but the latest law books are dated 1947. It's a disgrace. I've read where I'm sitting up in Danbury getting rich, writing a novel about Watergate. But I can't concentrate, especially without a typewriter.

"I haven't written a thing. I sit down with a pad and try to write longhand, but I can't think and I lose interest. I can't believe the money I'm spending on attorneys. It costs me \$1,200-\$1,500 every day I'm in a hearing or legal appearance. Luckily, my notoriety has sparked an interest in my books—I've had 19 titles issued this year, 17 reissues and two new ones—but all the money is going to lawyers."

Is the truth on Watergate really coming out? "Well, a lot of it is, but it's distorted. The Ervin committee questioning is erratic, but I'd better not criticize them because I'll be up there next month."

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