

WXPost JAN 15 1974
Security
Secret Is
A Puzzle

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Six months ago White House attorneys J. Fred Buzhardt and Leonard Garment gave a private briefing to the cochairmen of the Senate Watergate committee on a national security matter of "very urgent importance."

It was occasioned by a paragraph deleted from a 1971 memo from White House "plumbers" Egil (Bud) Krogh and David Young to presidential aide John D. Ehrlichman. The paragraph had become a subject of speculation at the public Watergate hearings.

In the course of the briefing the White House attorneys unfolded for the first time to Watergate committee chairman Sam J. Ervin Jr. (D-N.C.) and cochairman Howard H. Baker Jr. (R-Tenn.) the story of unauthorized leakage of National Security Council documents to the Pentagon by White House military liaison officers.

The affair of the leaked documents was one of Washington's most tantalizing Watergate secrets for months. Nonetheless, the episode figured in the request by White House attorneys that limits be drawn on grand jury inquiries into the operation of the plumbers. And the Senate Watergate committee agreed to take no further testimony and press for no further disclosures on the matter.

Yesterday the story of "The National Security Issue" in the Watergate investigation took a further curious turn.

Baker, while confirming that the White House regarded the matter as one "of

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very urgent importance," acknowledged that he did not know the specific basis of the White House concern or the nature of the documents which passed from the NSC to the Pentagon.

And a participant in the July secret meeting said Ervin's reaction at the time was that "it was more like the Keystone cops—comical rather than sinister . . . Everyone in the room played it down and though it was embarrassing."

Ervin was represented as being "surprised that the military people weren't arrested . . . Everyone agreed that it had nothing to do with Watergate and would explain nothing that the administration had done," the participant recalled.

Yet Baker acknowledged that the affair of the leaked documents, such as they were, was much on his mind when he declared at Florida's Disney World in November that the American people may have "seen only the top of the iceberg" in Watergate related scandals. The Tennessee Republican followed President Nixon's appearance before the Associated Press managing editors convention.

President Nixon, at the AP editors session, alluded by inference to the White House-Pentagon information snooping episode. He said that "national security matters were not matters that should be investigated, because there were some very highly sensitive matters involved, not only in Ellsberg but also another matter so sensitive that even Sen. Ervin and Sen. Baker have decided that they should not delve further into it."

Baker, in a telephone interview from his home in Huntsville, Tenn., said neither he nor Ervin were told last July or at any time since then the precise nature of the White House concern for national security.

Asked whether there was a fear at the White House in

1971 that the material might fall into unfriendly foreign hands, Baker replied in carefully chosen words: "I would not urge you to think there was anything in the nature of foreign involvement . . . The nature of the concern has not been disclosed."

One attorney prominently associated with the criminal prosecution of the Watergate cases, who requested that he remain anonymous, scoffingly questioned the priority of the document leaks as a national security breach of high consequence. "There were a good many things that ranked higher than that," he said.

In communicating presidential concern over the alleged military snitching of documents, attorneys for the White House asked federal prosecutors to curtail investigation of the White House plumbers in order not to divulge the national security secret.

In a recent appearance on the ABC program "Issues and Answers," Baker anticipated the Pentagon information-grabbing case when asked if any more Watergate bombshells were in prospect.

Citing a "matter of grave national importance," Baker said, "There are animals crashing around in the forest. I can hear them, but I can't see them."

The White House, meanwhile, on Friday sought to clarify the basis of its concern over the entire episode in a statement issued by the press office.

It said that while it still considered the matter inappropriate for public disclosure, it touched "on a matter peripheral to a national security issue . . ." That issue, said the White House, involved "deliberate leaks to the media of extremely sensitive information of interest to other nations."

It may be possible — at a later time — that "the facts can be made public without detriment to the national interest," the White House statement said.

One interpretation of the events was broadcast yesterday by CBS News, which theorized that the military document snatching "appeared to be motivated by the aims of wrecking the Nixon-Kissinger plan for better relations with Communist nations."

An another conjecture, offered by a knowledgeable Senate source, was that the dissemination of the grave national security issue was "an effort by Sen. Baker to create a diversionary matter."

The entire story is, by agreement on all sides, yet to be told.