

Knight News Service

WASHINGTON — Greed, fear, a sudden accidental death and spies who couldn't take the heat were among the elements that peeled away, layer by layer, the Watergate coverup.

And now only the heart of it remains, behind the last layer, torn in places and wearing thin.

But in a way, the coverup of the burglary at Democratic headquarters June 17, 1972, had been thin from the beginning.

It was suspected and charged and leaked and reported upon. Yet there were too many layers disguising the source of ultimate guilt.

So if one were to pick a time and a place when it all began to fall apart, it might have been at 2:27 p.m. Dec. 8, in the rain and fog over Chicago's Midway Airport, when a United Airlines Boeing 737 crashed short of the runway. Among the 40 who died was Dorothy Hunt, the wife of one of the original Watergate defendants, E. Howard Hunt. In Mrs. Hunt's hadbag investigators found \$10,000 in \$100 bills.

Although the discovery touched off speculation that she was a courier of coverup payments, relatives said the money was for a business investment.

Hunt, a former CIA spy and hack novelist, had debts, a big house and children to raise.

So, as testimony and Friday's indictments suggest, he got greedy and began putting on pressure for more money and executive clemency if and when he was convicted of the Watergate burglary.

The trial of the original burglary defendants — the men on the first layer — was to begin in January, and according to one, Hunt said if he didn't get money and a promise of executive clemency he could "blow the White House out of the water" with "information which could impeach the President."

James McCord was the man who says he heard these things from Hunt. And as his trial date approached, McCord, too, was getting nervous.

A former FBI and CIA man with a long, clean record of government service, McCord had been captured inside the Watergate headquarters of the Democrats. And because he was chief of security for the President's campaign, his arrest helped fire the suspicions of high-level skullduggery.

But McCord, good soldier though he had been, didn't want to go to jail. More than that; he had a certain love for the CIA and he had heard through the grapevine that the White House masterminds of the coverup were trying to blame the agency.

McCord had written anonymous letters to CIA officials warning them of the danger, and emissaries from the White House promised help for him and his family.

On Jan. 11, Hunt, who had received the assurances he wanted, pleaded guilty and told reporters "higher - ups" were not involved.

McCord chose to go to trial rather than benignly plead guilty and keep his mouth shut.

As was his habit, he took copious notes, and he listened impassively as the jury found him guilty and Judge John J. Sirica said: "I am still not satisfied that all of the pertinent facts that might be available have been produced before an American jury."

Five days later, on Feb. 7, the Senate, which had been hamstrung because of the pending trial and the 1972 elec-

tions, voted to establish the Watergate investigating committee.

Later that month, another Senate committee began inquiring into the qualifications of L. Patrick Gray III to be the new FBI director.

Perhaps because of McCord, or because so many agencies had been drawn into the coverup, there were leaks everywhere. Some who were talking included FBI agents, and even White House personnel.

The Gray hearings established that Herbert Kalmbach, the President's personal attorney and campaign fund-raiser, along with Dwight Chapin, the President's appointment secretary, had paid for political sabotage against Democrats.

Gray disclosed that John Dean, the President's White House counsel, had sat in on all FBI interviews during the Watergate investigation. He also acknowledged that Hugh Sloan, the campaign treasurer, had disbursed thousands of dollars "for unknown reasons."

The first layer around the coverup was beginning to peel, when, on March 21, McCord wrote a letter to Judge Sirica, who read it in open court two days later.

"Others involved in the Watergate operation were not identified during the trial," he said, "perjury occurred during the trial . . . there was political pressure applied to the defendants to plead guilty and remain silent."

From then on, within the White House — on the next layer of the coverup — it was every man for himself.

Dean, strongly suspecting that his superiors, including the President himself, were setting him up as the defense, put out the word that he would not be a patsy for anyone.

By that time, in April, 1973, Dean, McCord and anyone else who wanted to be in a position to cop a plea had someone to talk to — the Senate Watergate Committee.

McCord had testified first behind closed doors March 28. The grand jury renewed its work with a new intensity, helped by witnesses prodded out of silence by Sirica's threat of heavy sentencing.

McCord implicated not only Dean but Jeb Magruder, the deputy director of the President's campaign organization. Magruder and Dean virtually competed to see who would talk first to the Justice Department, the Grand Jury, and the Watergate committee.

On April 30, as the next layer was falling, the President announced the resignations of Dean, H.R. Haldeman, his chief of staff and John Ehrlichman, his domestic affairs counsel.

Nixon took responsibility for the overzealousness of his aides but not the blame for their acts. He hoped that Watergate would stop there.

But it didn't, and couldn't.

Harvard scholar Archibald Cox was appointed special prosecutor. With the help of a brilliant and eager staff, he began making Dean, Magruder and others pay for the pleas they wanted to cop.

Their testimony before the Watergate committee had holes and leads that prosecutors pursued. Other men who were part of the Dean-Magruder layer were implicated and threatened with prison.

But because the White House is like a corporation, where each member is a cog and almost no one knows what all are doing, the innermost layers stubbornly remained.

Until Friday, the 13th of July, when staff members of the Watergate committee learned, almost accidentally, that the offices of the innermost layers had been equipped with devices to record almost everything that went on.

The man they learned, this from was Alexander P. Butterfield, whose loyalty to the President had gotten him the appointment as chairman of the Federal Aviation Agency.

Ironically, Prosecutor Cox had asked the Watergate committee to hold off its hearings because of possible interference with his investigation. As it turned out, the hearings were indispensable to uncovering the coverup.

The existence of the tapes and the possibility that they would support Dean's story and implicate the men closest

to the President began stripping the layer around them.

As the summer faded, the special prosecutor was putting pressure not only on the President, but on those who had jumped ship. If they had been reluctant at first to talk about anyone besides themselves, they were ready then to implicate others.

The special prosecutor, armed with the leads he'd been given, headed into new directions: campaign financing, political favors in return for funds; the President's personal financial transactions; illegal wiretaps ordered by the White House; burglaries authorized by the President.

In Los Angeles, Judge Matt Byrne, trying Daniel Ellsberg for the theft of the Pentagon Papers, learned that the White House had concealed from him a wiretap involving Ellsberg and a burglary at the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist carried out by some of the men who broke into the Watergate.

Byrne was himself compelled to admit that he had met with Ehrlichman and the President during the trial, to talk about an appointment to the top job at the FBI.

In broadening the investigation and in demanding the White House tapes, Cox ran head-on into a President fighting for his political life, and the prosecutor was fired.

But even as he left and Leon Jaworski took his place, it had become apparent that the cover-up was gone, and the last of the layers would go with it.