

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, March 6—Like Mrs. O'Leary's cow, which supposedly kicked over a lantern and started the great Chicago fire, I might have been personally responsible for the whole Watergate conflagration.

Presumptuous? Surely. But here's my claim:

A few days ago, after an essay in this space castigated the staffs of committees and prosecutors for sloppiness in transcripts that led to a perjury indictment for H. R. Haldeman, I received a call from the Senate Watergate committee.

An investigator there named Marc Lackritz, age 27, ominously said he wanted to interrogate me in connection with a memo I had written to Mr. Haldeman four years ago.

Goosebumps, spine-tingling and scalp-crawling wracked my frame; this was the celebrated "chilling effect" that every intimidated member of the media looks forward to.

I told the young investigator with the engagingly anti-élitist name that I suspected a clumsy effort to retaliate for the essay in the paper that morning. He had not even read *The New York Times* that day, he expostulated, nor had his boss, Assistant Counsel Terry Lenzner, who had been excoriated here for his unprofessional, boorish persecution of an upright witness.

Afflicted with second thoughts, Mr. Lackritz hastened to say, "There is no suggestion or question of impropriety on your part." I told him there was a big fat question of impropriety on his part, and called Sam Dash, chief counsel for the Watergate committee, so he could hear my teeth chattering from the chilling effect.

Mr. Dash soothingly explained that he had not read *The New York Times* himself that morning and added "Yours is not highly critical information. We're only clearing up the scraps, getting around to the low priority fact-finding."

As the newest devotee of the *Miranda* decision, I asked him to explain my rights: "You can turn down the request for an informal interview," Counsel Dash replied, "and only if Senator Ervin, Senator Baker and I thought the information was so important would a subpoena be issued, but frankly, your memo is *de minimus*."

My attitude changed from chilled to heated—*de minimus*, indeed! On the understanding that I would write about the committee's line of questioning, I spoke with Mr. Lackritz whose protestation that he is not one of my constant readers I now accept. On the telephone he dictated a memo from me to Mr. Haldeman dated

Aug. 4, 1970, which it would be good to have out in the open:

"According to *Newsweek*, Larry O'Brien (along with Cliff White) will be on the board of directors of an 'international consulting firm.' Lobbying for foreign governments without the appearance of lobbying, I guess.

"Can't we raise a big fuss about this? Insist that he register as a foreign agent, demand to know what fees he will be getting for what work and 'to what extent the Democratic National Committee is available for sale to foreign governments?'

"We could have a little fun with this and keep O'Brien on the defensive."

This was not even political hardball: Such a demand for public disclosure of outside income by the head of a political party was proper then, and in retrospect seems more appropriate than ever.

But what interested the committee was not so much my suggestion as the possible Haldeman reaction. He did not send a reply to me, to my recollection (hah! he's guilty, see how careful he's getting) but Mr. Lackritz then read to me a memorandum from Jack Caulfield dated later that week.

Mr. Caulfield's memo, addressed to nobody, reported that a "discreet inquiry" was being made about the *Newsweek* item. As we all know now, Mr. Caulfield was in the investigative line of work with Anthony Ulasewicz.

What happened then? I don't know. But the investigator's questions reveal the outlines of the chain of evidence that the Watergate committee is trying to forge:

The questions begin with Mr. Haldeman's interest in Mr. O'Brien and the request that must have been made to investigators to dig something up. Then there is a gap followed by questions about a knowledge of Mr. O'Brien's employment by Howard Hughes, and by questions about the Hughes contribution to Mr. Rebozo.

Another gap. Then, as we are all aware, came the break-in to Democratic headquarters at the Watergate, with Mr. O'Brien the primary target of a vicious political bugging.

Can the Senate committee develop a link between Mr. Caulfield's "discreet inquiry" and the subsequent Hunt-Liddy operation? If so, its properly maligned staff would make the special prosecutor's force look like amateurs. The likelihood is that the leaky Watergate committee staff has not made that connection, or else everybody would already know about it.

But if they do, and if it should turn out that my query was the O'Leary cow that started the whole thing, what can I say after I say I'm sorry?