

ESSAY

By William Safire

WASHINGTON—In the coming week, we are to be treated to a 500-page book published by the Senate intelligence subcommittee on the subject of C.I.A. assassination plots. Its conclusion: No "hard" evidence has been produced to directly connect any United States President to a murder.

In coming months, however, we have a different treat in store: a novel, avowedly a work of fiction, by John Ehrlichman, the former chief domestic aide to President Nixon who has been twice convicted of Watergate-related misdeeds. Its plot is based on the opposite conclusion.

The hero-villain of "The Company," which will be published by Simon and Shuster, is a Director of Central Intelligence. In the early sixties, when he was Deputy Chief, a fictional President gave him an order to arrange for the murder of a man connected with the invasion of a Caribbean island, which he carried out. In the novel, the report of this episode is the most terrible secret carried in the C.I.A. files.

After the President dies in office, his successor—wanting a C.I.A. director whom he could easily control—puts our hero-villain at the helm of "The Company." The secret report of the assassination is protected. But in the late sixties, a new President comes on the scene whom the C.I.A. director fears.

To protect himself and the agency's terrible secrets, the C.I.A. chief culti-

vates a national security adviser with a German accent who winds up at the right hand of the new President, and who is able to keep the hero-villain in place. But the secretive new President never trusts the C.I.A., and conducts some dirty-trick national security surveillance with a special White House unit.

I won't give away the whole plot—that's the function of reviewers when the novel comes out—but suffice it to say that the C.I.A. chief finds out about the amateur White House spies, and uses this information to blackmail the President into destroying the assassination report and selecting a "safe" C.I.A. successor, as our hero goes off to become an ambassador.

Ehrlichman's book is a *roman à clef*—literally, a novel with a key, skirting libel by disguising characters and events—a literary form used by Aldous Huxley in "Point Counterpoint" and Simone de Beauvoir in "The Mandarins." The 385-page manuscript is now being pored over; and bid for; by book clubs and paperback houses.

The novel is surprisingly well written. I have been assured and reassured that it is the product of John Ehrlichman in his New Mexico retreat, with-

out ghosts or rewriters, and the story stands up as a gripping and powerful yarn. The romantic subplot is not much, but the scenes inside the White House and C.I.A. are redolent with verisimilitude.

And the characters—all so familiar to us, political figures whose names have become household cursewords—hidden only by fiction's figleaf. The author spares nobody: not the C.I.A. Director, not the flatterable and fawning national security adviser, not the political hatchetman, and least of all the President.

Ehrlichman's "President Richard Monckton" reflects only the dark side of the leader he followed all his life. In presenting a self-deluding, hate-filled moralizer as President, the author settles his score with the man he feels led him into crimes, abandoned his defense and denied his pardon.

That portrait, so one-sided, is false, though the dialogue rings so frighteningly true; those who despise our recent President will have a field day, which alone will account for much of the book's certain best-sellerdom.

But the most intriguing aspects of this novel are the questions raised. Was there—in real life—anything like a report of a Presidential murder order destroyed by a subsequent President? Was a national security adviser's secretary on the C.I.A. payroll before and after he entered the White House?

Did a hatchetman bring an ex-C.I.A. spy into the Oval Office to meet the President, and did he then go on to be the head of the dirty-tricks unit? Was a picture made of that meeting? Did the C.I.A. isolate and circumvent a Deputy Director placed in its midst by the President?

And more—did the C.I.A. stake out an expected burglary site and photograph White House operatives at work? And was this evidence, or any other, used by the C.I.A. Director to blackmail the President?

Or is this a stack of thin-sliced baloney, the figment of a self-protective imagination, the work of a man willing to cast doubt on anybody just to absolve himself and raise the money to pay his legal defense?

I don't profess to know. No hard evidence is offered; there are some bits of truth in this strange fiction, and some falsehood in the hints at truth, but who can say how much?

Certainly not John Ehrlichman. To anyone who poses these questions, he replies: "I don't know what you're talking about. I wrote a novel."