

Watergate and the CIA *Part 5/18/73*

The rush of events has cast the impression that the Central Intelligence Agency, too, was caught up in the crisis of governance known as Watergate and was somehow despoiled or suborned. But such a comprehensive indictment should not be handed down casually. A closer look at the three main episodes of Watergate-CIA involvement suggests another and more complex view.

In the first episode, in July-September 1971, the CIA was asked by John Ehrlichman to give retired CIA employee Howard Hunt, then identified as a White House security consultant, technical help for an undisclosed mission. The Pentagon Papers had just been published. The CIA's legislative charter gives it "responsibility for protecting intelligence sources and methods from unauthorized disclosures," and in that context the then-deputy director, Gen. Robert Cushman, who had long known Mr. Ehrlichman and who had also served as a personal aide to Vice President Nixon, granted technical aid to Howard Hunt. But he was put off by Hunt's manner; the agency, learning that "domestic clandestine operations" were involved, cut the Hunt link in five weeks; General Cushman quickly informed Mr. Ehrlichman. The burglary of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist took place a month later. At the same time, CIA Director Richard Helms, in the same context of an ostensible White House investigation of security leaks, ordered up a CIA psychiatric profile of Mr. Ellsberg at White House request. His successor, James Schlesinger, later termed these missions "ill advised."

In the second episode, beginning only six days after the Watergate break-in of June 17, 1972, top White House aides reportedly tried on repeated occasions to induce the CIA to halt an FBI probe into the "laundered" Mexican money that financed the break-in (by having the CIA invent a false rationale that the probe would compromise CIA sources); those aides then asked CIA to use secret funds to "go bail or pay the salaries" of Watergate conspirators. By available testimony, the CIA resolutely rejected these entreaties. Gen. Vernon Walters, the then-deputy director and also a former aide to Vice President Nixon, even said he would resign and go to the President before so compromising the agency.

In the third episode, in early 1973—by then, "Watergate" was rapidly unfolding—the White House sought to have the CIA receive back (knowingly) the Ellsberg burglary materials it had blindly given Hunt in 1971. The CIA absolutely refused.

So what do we have? In all three episodes, the White House trampled over the provision of the CIA's charter specifying that the agency function "under the National Security Council" and it sought to turn the CIA to purposes having at best a tenuous connection to the agency's intelligence mandate—even the way the White House presented it—and at worst no connection whatsoever. In the episodes involving the Mexican money and the receiving back of Ellsberg burglary materials, successive CIA directors and their deputies stood off fierce White House pressure aimed at forcing them to violate the spirit and letter of their charter. In the episode involving aid for a mission whose purpose was at first unknown to the CIA, the agency recovered promptly when it got a better sense of what was going on.

The further question arises of whether Mr. Helms should have reported, either to the President or Congress, whatever may have been his suspicion or knowledge at various times that something sour was going on. We submit that no final answer can be offered until there becomes available a fuller record not only of precisely what Mr. Helms told Congress last February and March and again in the last few days, but also of the steps he may have taken to protect the CIA from taint before he was relieved of the agency's directorship.

To establish a kind of base line, we think it appropriate meanwhile to recall a rare public speech Mr. Helms gave in April 1971, before any of the known incidents had occurred, in which he spoke with feeling and sensitivity of the difficult role of a secret intelligence agency in a free society. The CIA operates "under constant supervision and direction of the National Security Council," he said. It assumes only "normal responsibilities for protecting the physical security of our own personnel, our facilities, and our classified information . . . In short, we do not target on American citizens."

To the extent that the integrity of the professional intelligence community may have been compromised, we think it necessary to look first to the White House. It was the men there who in their cavalier abuse of power and their contempt for the institutions of American government—even an institution as sensitive as the CIA—tried but, it seems, largely failed to compromise and subvert the CIA.