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Washington Merry-Go-Round

by JACK ANDERSON



WASHINGTON — The FBI conducted a quiet, internal investigation last February of its handling of the Watergate case. Conclusion: The White House obstructed what otherwise was a thorough investigation.

FBI officials were careful to keep any criticism of the White House out of their internal communications. This was an understandable precaution, since sensitive FBI reports had been handed over to the White House.

The assistant director in charge of investigations, Robert E. Gebhardt, summarized the findings in a short, factual memo intended for FBI eyes only.

"The handling of the Watergate investigation from the headquarters level through the field operation level," Gebhardt wrote to the acting associate director, W. Mark Felt, on February 23, "was done in accordance with procedures, both administrative and investigative, that are customarily employed in any

major investigative effort by the FBI.

"Among cases handled in the recent past in which similar procedures were followed are: The assassination of Martin Luther King; Capitol bombing, March 1, 1971; and major kidnaping cases such as the Barbara Jane Mackle case."

What the memo didn't mention was the White House role in the investigation. President Nixon had assigned his counsel, John Dean, to investigate whether there was any White House involvement in the Watergate scandal.

The FBI concluded, according to our sources, that Dean had withheld incriminating documents, covered up other evidence and sent FBI agents chasing false leads. At one point, Dean even suggested that Watergate culprit E. Howard Hunt get out of the country.

None of this was mentioned in writing, of course, since Dean had access to the FBI's investigative reports.

Footnote: In fairness to the FBI's embattled interim director L. Patrick Gray, there was no evidence he interfered in any way with the FBI investigation.

IMPEACHMENT TALK : The Capitol cloakrooms are buzzing with talk of impeaching President Nixon.

The discussion, however, has been mainly technical. Many House members are unsure how impeachment works. They, therefore, have bombarded the Library of Congress and the House parliamentarian for details.

The congressmen have been told that any member of the House can introduce a resolution to impeach the President. If the move is seconded, then all matters stop until the question is resolved.

Meanwhile, House leaders have been trying to squelch talk of impeachment. "The Republicans are doing a good job messing up themselves," Majority Leader Tip O'Neill told his colleagues privately. "Let's stay out of it for awhile."

But maverick liberals,

including Bella Abzug, D-N.Y., and John Moss, D-Calif., are buttonholing their colleagues and urging that the House take strong action.

"At the very least, we should set up a committee to investigate the President's conduct in this matter," contends Representative Abzug. "We should be prepared either to clear the President or impeach him."

Immediately after the President's speech, liberal tempers were red hot. On Tuesday, several groups huddled on the House floor. The attitude from several liberals was for an impeachment resolution. The idea was rejected; the liberals decided the public wouldn't accept an impeachment resolution unless it came from the leadership or a respected Republican.

Impeachment talk continues to make House leaders edgy. They view the White House shakeup as a chance to improve relations with the President. They would prefer to let the Senate and the Justice Department handle the Watergate mess.

Footnote: Caught in the crossfire between the leadership and the liberals is House Judiciary chairman Pete Rodino, D-N.J., who is taking his cues from the history books. Rodino has introduced a bill that would require the President to appoint a special Watergate prosecutor and subject him to Senate confirmation. Congress approved a similar resolution during the Teapot Dome Scandal.

OUTBOARD MOTORS: The outboard motor lobby, led by the Boating Industry Association, has tried to depict their oil-spitting engines as little more harmful to America's lakes than a little spring rain. To be sure, the newer ones release little oil into the water, but millions of older engines still drip gunk and gas.

Now, a new survey done under the auspices of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute's famed Fresh Water Institute indicates boaters and lakeside dwellers themselves are worried about what the motors do to lakes. Dr. Nicholas Clesceri, director of the institute, has given us an advance peek at the survey which shows that among "recreationists" worried about water quality, up to 40 per cent are most concerned about "films of gasoline and oil." Yet, ironically, the study, done by K. Jack Kooyoomjian (cq), shows only 1.5 per cent to 17 per cent of the boaters are willing to see their own horsepower cut.