

Sabotage by Segretti: Network of Amateurs

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By JOHN M. CREWDSON

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The small-framed lawyer who arrived in Florida in December of 1971 resembled in style countless other young bachelors on a brief winter's fling.

But "Donald Simmons," as he called himself, carried with him a list of contacts in Miami, Tampa, Orlando and Jacksonville, and he had little time for sun and fun and other personal indulgences.

His real name was Donald H. Segretti, and he was on a secret mission for the White House to recruit a cadre of eager young Republicans very much like himself who would be willing to participate in an extraordinary scenario to help re-elect the President of the United States.

Approval of Haldeman

Mr. Segretti came to Florida from New Hampshire, where, he has told friends, he was also active. But it was the organization of amateur spies and saboteurs he assembled in Florida that was to set a pattern for similar covert operations in other important primary states, including Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and California.

A few months earlier, Mr. Segretti had been hired by Dwight L. Chapin and Gordon C. Strachan, two of President Nixon's aides, to head an undercover program of spying and

sabotage directed against the Democratic Presidential candidates—an operation that had been approved by H. R. Haldeman, then chief of the White House staff and one of the men closest to Mr. Nixon.

The goal that Mr. Chapin and Mr. Strachan had set for the young man, whom they had known since college days, was to throw the Democratic party

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into such confusion during the primary elections that it would be difficult for it to unite following its national convention in the summer.

An extensive inquiry by The New York Times, together with information from Government investigators and others familiar with his activities, has provided a detailed picture of how Mr. Segretti set out in Florida to accomplish this goal, and of the techniques that he would use later against Democratic candidates in other primary campaigns.

In each city, from the airport

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or a motel lounge, Mr. Simmons telephoned his local contact and told him that a mutual friend had suggested that he look him up. In Tampa, that contact was Robert Melton Benz, an affable, ambitious former chairman of the Young Republicans Club of Hillsborough County.

Mr. Simmons — Mr. Benz would not learn his caller's real name until several months after the Watergate scandal had broken—arranged to meet him in a Tampa motel where, after a few beers, the true nature of the business that had brought him to Florida was explained.

He was looking for savvy men and women, Mr. Segretti said, experienced in campus and local politics in Florida, who were eager to work in a clandestine way to influence the crucial Democratic primary scheduled for March 14.

Vital Information

By infiltrating the organizations of several leading Democrats, Mr. Segretti explained, these individuals could supply Nixon forces with vital inside information on strategy, financial support and other intelligence that could not be obtained through normal channels.

The conversation hedged on the exact nature of involvement, but the stranger found to "screw up" the different Democratic campaigns in the Tampa area, with such tactics as hiring pickets and demonstrators to disrupt personal appearances, or inserting bogus literature into the campaign to get the Democrats fighting among themselves over accusations of mudslinging.

In addition to the appreciation of the Republican party, Mr. Benz was promised a salary for his labors, and extra cash to finance a string of a half-dozen operatives to carry out the work.

Assembled His Cast

In much the same manner, Mr. Segretti traveled through Florida, assembling his cast of political spies and agents provocateurs. Some of them have been granted immunity from prosecution in return for their testimony against him. Mr. Benz and his counterpart in Miami, Martin Douglas Kelly, were granted immunity by a Federal grand jury recently, as was one of Mr. Benz's main operatives, a 26-year-old woman named Patricia E. Griffin.

Both clean-cut young men in their mid-twenties, Mr. Benz and Mr. Kelly possessed an engaging personal style that had thrust them into post-campus positions of responsibility inside the Republican party. Both enjoyed personal friendships that put them into direct contact with like-minded young women and men across the state.

Both said they wished to help the President, and were therefore receptive to Mr. Segretti's suggestion that one way to be of service was to sow confusion and discontent among Mr. Nixon's opponents.

However, in the weeks and months that followed, the grand design degenerated into a series of bungled attempts to discredit the Democrats, succeeding at times, but often producing results that failed to keep pace with the Democratic candidates' own resourcefulness for self-inflicted injury.

A Valuable Agent

One of the first contacts Mr. Benz made after his initial conference with Mr. Segretti was Miss Griffin, who had moved to Tampa from Spartanburg, S. C., to be with her stepfather, the crossed her desk in Mr. Muskie's Tampa headquarters.

Mr. Benz persuaded "Peg," as her friends called her, to infiltrate the local Muskie campaign as a spy and to accept \$75 a month, plus expenses.

She eventually became the most valuable of Mr. Benz's agents, supplying him with extensive reports on sensitive Muskie campaign material that came across her desk in Mr. Muskie's Tampa headquarters.

Mr. Benz succeeded in placing another young woman he knew from Young Republican circles, Esline Frohlich, in a similar position inside the Tampa headquarters of Senator Henry M. Jackson of Washington. But after these important spots were filled, Mr. Benz's talents as a spymaster seemed to slide downhill.

Got Only \$50

The man he hired next, George A. Hearing, was a thin, middle-aged accountant who had been active on the periphery of Republican circles and who had a drinking problem that was one of the less-well-guarded secrets in Tampa politics.

Hearing later told Government investigators that he had been promised "big money" to help create turmoil in the campaign of several Democratic contenders but had received only about \$50 for a dozen acts of sabotage from Mr. Benz, who himself received between \$3,000 and \$6,000 from Mr. Segretti.

Hearing did figure, however, in the dissemination of the letter that was mass-mailed on orders from Mr. Benz three days before the Florida primary. The original copy of the letter, which the Government charges was sent to Mr. Benz through the mail by Mr. Segretti, was accompanied by several hundred envelopes and blank letterhead stationery of the kind being used by the Muskie campaign.

Addressed to "Fellow Democrats," the letter cautioned

voters who had not yet decided to vote for Mr. Muskie that they "should be aware of several facts" about two of his Democratic opponents.

The "facts" included the charges, which have been denied and never substantiated, that Senator Jackson had fathered an illegitimate daughter while a high school senior, and had twice been arrested for homosexual activity in Washington, D. C., and that Senator Hubert H. Humphrey once had been arrested for drunken driving while in the company of a "known call girl" who had been provided for him by a lumber lobbyist.

Mr. Benz ordered Hearing to reproduce about 200 copies of the scurrilous letter and to mail them out, principally to Jackson supporters in the Tampa area. For this, Hearing and Mr. Segretti were indicted by a Federal grand jury in Florida last May, under a Federal law that prohibits the distribution of false or unsigned campaign literature.

Hearing confessed his guilt as a co-conspirator and was sentenced to one year in Federal prison. Mr. Segretti pleaded not guilty and will stand trial in the fall.

Hearing has also described his other activities, most of which were petty doings such as planting stinkbombs in a Muskie campaign office to disrupt operations there, or recruiting scruffy, long-haired white youths to distribute anti-Wallace literature at Wallace rallies.

Cards at Rallies

At two Wallace rallies, for example, the Benz-Hearing team circulated through the crowd, handing out small cards that read, on one side, "If you liked Hitler you'll just love Wallace." The other side carried an appeal to vote for Mr. Muskie.

The tactic of hiring hostile, long-haired demonstrators to harass President Nixon during campaign stops was also suggested to Mr. Benz, who received ideas and materials anonymously in the mail, sometimes accompanied by \$100 bills. He assumed that the source was always his friend Don Simmons.

Most of his communications and orders from Mr. Segretti, however, came by telephone. Copies of Mr. Segretti's long-distance telephone records show that he called Mr. Benz's home telephone 20 times between March and July of last year, and that he placed about 40 calls to Mr. Kelly during the same period.

On some occasions, Mr. Segretti took an active role in the Florida projects. On Jan. 5, 1972, for example, he attended a reception for Senator Muskie at the Tampa Manger Inn while 10 black pickets hired by Hearing paraded on the sidewalk outside.

While the pickets carried signs suggesting that Mr. Muskie was a bigot because of his assertion that a national ticket with a black Vice-Presidential candidate probably could not win, another Benz operative, Kip Edwards, 20, was busy plastering Muskie stickers all over Senator Jackson's Tampa headquarters.

False Press Releases

But not all of the Tampa group's activities were so sophomoric, and some besides the "sex letter" may have violated Federal laws.

On two occasions, for example, Mr. Lenz and Miss Griffin wrote and mailed out false press releases, charging in one that the Muskie campaign was illegally using two Government-owned typewriters borrowed from the office of a local Congressman, and divulging in the other information about a confidential reception Senator Muskie was planning.

Mr. Benz's work in Florida apparently impressed Mr. Segretti, and following George Wallace's victory over Senators Muskie, Humphrey and Jackson there, he was invited to join in similar operations in other states.

Mr. Segretti sent him first to Pittsburgh, where he tried, without much success, to set up an organization for the Pennsylvania primary similar to the one he had headed in Tampa.

Went to Milwaukee

After he had been there for three days, Mr. Benz received a call from Simmons, who asked him to come to Chicago. There, Mr. Segretti gave him \$400 or \$500 in expense money.

After spending the night at an airport motel, the two men rented a small car and drove to Milwaukee, where Senators Muskie, Humphrey, McGovern and Jackson and Governor Wallace were all campaigning hard for the Wisconsin primary.

In Wisconsin, after casing the headquarters of several Democrats, Mr. Segretti and Mr. Benz decided to turn their efforts against Senators Muskie and Humphrey, whom they still considered the strongest contenders and greatest threats to the President.

Using the name of George Mitchell, a Muskie advance man, the two began to order deliveries to the Senator's hotel—several dozen flowers, fifty pizzas, fifty buckets of chicken, two limousines.

"That sort of thing may sound like horseplay," said a former Democratic advance man, "but when you're running a road campaign the most absolutely important thing is the candidate's schedule, and if you have to keep stopping to deal with stuff like this you fall behind and you end up making a lot of local people mad because you're late."

Mr. Segretti next composed a

false handbill under Senator Humphrey's name, inviting voters to attend a gala free lunch on the Saturday before the election with the Senator, Mrs. Martin Luther King Jr. and Lorne Greene, the star of the "Bonanza" television series.

He had the leaflet printed and distributed in a largely black section of Milwaukee, where a copy was intercepted by the Humphrey staff. According to Regis Goyke, one of the Senator's campaign officials in Wisconsin, a disclaimer was placed in the Saturday editions of the morning newspapers.

As a result, he said, only about 50 "angry and disappointed people" showed up for the nonexistent free lunch.

'Sedan Chair' Operation

Republican field intelligence on the Wisconsin primary was also provided to the Nixon Re-election committee's "Sedan Chair" operation by Michael McMinoway, code-named "Sedan Chair II," who had attached himself to the Muskie campaign there.

A former Nixon campaign official has said that committee's own sabotage effort was supervised by Jeb Stuart Magruder, the deputy campaign director, and financed with cash from Republican campaign contributions.

According to his father, Mr. McMinoway, 26, had been a \$16,000-a-year assembly line foreman at the Ford Motor Company plant in Louisville, Ky., when he was recruited by the Committee for The Re-election of the President as a spy.

In March of last year, the elder McMinoway said, his son had asked Ford for a leave of absence from the job, which he found boring, to accept an "educational grant" from Washington and Lee University. But Glynn McMinoway said that his son had actually used the leave to carry out his undercover political activities.

Michael, he said with pride, was "one of the best agents they had," adding that he had always been assigned to the Democratic candidate considered the leading contender for the party's nomination.

'Knocked Out of the Water'

"They put him on Muskie," he recalled, "and he was knocked out of the water. Then they put him on Humphrey, and he was knocked out of the water. Then they put him on McGovern."

As evidence that his son had been a "professional," Mr. McMinoway said that Michael had been careful to keep copies of the reports that he forwarded to the Nixon re-election committee. "He has a good story to tell," the father added. The younger McMinoway has been unavailable to newsmen.

There has been speculation in political circles that the Re-

publican sabotage operation was intended from the beginning to bring the Democratic nomination to Mr. McGovern, the candidate believed least likely to capture the moderate wing of his party, and therefore the preferred opponent for President Nixon.

But the true strategy appears to have been a less-sophisticated one of simply concentrating on the candidate perceived as the front-runner at a given time, thereby denying delegates to the Democratic convention a clear favorite to select as their nominee.

Mr. Benz has told Federal investigators that, following Senator Muskie's last-place finish in the April 4 Wisconsin primary, the Segretti operation shifted its attention to Senator Humphrey. So, apparently, did "Sedan Chair," judging from Mr. McMinoway's withdrawal from the Muskie organization after Wisconsin to take a job in Mr. Humphrey's Philadelphia office.

Following the Florida primary, Mr. Segretti was in fre-

quent touch by telephone with a number of individuals in other states where important primary elections were being held.

Two of these persons were Charles Svihlik of Indianapolis, like Mr. Benz a former Young Republican leader, and Thomas J. Visny, who served as an aide to Illinois Gov. Richard B. Ogilvie before Mr. Visny was killed in an automobile accident last fall.

Mr. Svihlik, 24, in an interview last fall recalled that Mr. Visny, a close friend, had received mysterious packages of cash in the mail for distribution to people who had been asked to take on unspecified political tasks.

"Once he dusted the money for fingerprints," Mr. Svihlik said, "and there wasn't any on any of the bills."

Mr. Svihlik, who received nearly a dozen telephone calls himself that were billed to Mr. Segretti's home or credit card between February and early May, the time of the Indiana primary, maintained then that he did not know of anyone named Segretti.

But he indicated that Mr. Segretti may have used the name of Simmons in his calls. In a recent interview, Mr. Svihlik ridiculed reports that he had received some \$2,000 from Mr. Segretti and added that he would not discuss the matter further outside a court of law.

Mr. Segretti's known activities in California, the last of the important primary states, are mostly repetitions of the techniques used by his organization in Florida.

Pickets Hired

Demonstrators and pickets were hired to harass Democratic candidates in front of television cameras during campaign stops, and spies were placed inside campaign headquarters, according to those who participated in the California operation. There were also the usual anonymous letters with Los Angeles postmarks that contained information, instructions and cash.

"Let's say McGovern came to town," said one Republican who participated in the operation. "I wouldn't be interested in what he's got to say, so I wouldn't go. But the news media would cover it, and it



Senator Henry M. Jackson, who sought the Democratic nomination for President in 1972, giving orange juice to young men carrying signs purporting to be for Senator Edmund S. Muskie, a rival, opposite his headquarters

in Tampa before the Florida primary. The youths, according to Robert Melton Benz, were paid \$15 each by him from funds supplied by Donald H. Segretti, who used the name Simmons in this mission for the Nixon campaign.

would come out being all pro-McGovern. Every time he said something anti-Nixon there would be big applause, and that would be on the TV news. So if we got some people there with signs, there would not be quite as much favorable coverage on the news."

Senator Muskie also suffered several difficulties during the pre-primary period in California, while he was still con-

sidered a major contender. None of these have ever been fully explained, but Mr. Segretti's techniques were used.

On one occasion, potential contributors received a fabricated letter, on Muskie stationery, saying that the campaign would depend on small donations and did not want money from "the usual fat-cats." Later, during a campaign swing through Oregon, the pilot of the Muskie campaign plane was somehow slipped a bogus schedule and landed in the wrong city, miles from the Senator's real destination, thus disrupting an entire day of campaign appearances.

Blank stationery was also stolen from one of Senator Humphrey's offices in California just before the primary there and two fabricated, and presumably illegal, letters were sent to the press that, among other things, accused Representative Shirley A. Chisholm of Brooklyn of having mental problems.

Yet another letter was mailed out over the forged signature of a campaign aide to

former Senator Eugene J. McCarthy, urging McCarthy backers to support Senator Humphrey as a means of hurting Senator McGovern and deadlocking the Democratic convention. Federal agents are investigating the possibility that Mr. Segretti was involved in the bogus mailing.

Abduction Plans

Like other Republican officials, Mr. Segretti was also interested in the Republican convention, then scheduled for San Diego. Mr. Magruder has testified that plans were discussed among high campaign officials "relating to the abduction of individuals, particularly members of radical groups that we were concerned about on the convention at San Diego."

Mr. Magruder told the Senate Watergate committee that those plans were rejected in January of 1972, but several months later, Mr. Segretti was

discussing similar ideas in San Diego.

Ronald Johnson, a student at San Diego State College, has said that Mr. Segretti recruited him to spy on local radicals, stressing that he did not want the San Diego convention "to turn into another Chicago." The student added:

"One thing Segretti said stood out in my mind. He told me if I located any trouble-makers, and there are several well known ones here, they could be 'gotten rid of.' I asked him what he meant by that and he said, 'they could be sent out of town for a limited time.'"

Mr. Magruder testified that the "rejected" plans had involved kidnapping radicals, transporting them to Mexico, and releasing them after the Republican convention had ended.

Hunt's Calls Checked

Within a few days of the break-in, Federal agents investigating the affairs of E. Howard Hunt Jr., by then a suspect in the bugging case, had routinely subpoenaed his telephone records and had discovered a number of calls to Mr. Segretti's Los Angeles number.

Within a week, the F.B.I. had called Mr. Segretti and asked for an interview. According to his long-time friend, Larry Young, Mr. Segretti immediately called Mr. Chapin and asked for an assurance that he would not be abandoned by the White House as a "sacrificial lamb."

Mr. Young, a Los Angeles lawyer, said that the assurance was received. Mr. Segretti then called Mr. Strachan at the White House, who in turn called John W. Dean 3d, the Presidential counsel.

According to Mr. Dean's testimony before the Senate Watergate committee, thus was begun a cover-up of the Segretti affair that was "consistent with other parts of the general White House cover-up which followed the Watergate incident."

Mr. Strachan asked Mr. Dean

to meet with the frightened young man at a Washington, D.C., hotel. He told Mr. Dean only that Mr. Segretti was a "dirty tricks" operator who was being paid by Herbert W. Kalmbach, the President's personal lawyer, and that he, Mr. Strachan, "was not aware of all of Segretti's activities."

When Mr. Dean arrived at the hotel, he said, the question pressing on Mr. Segretti's mind was "whether he should mention [to the F.B.I.] the fact that Strachan and Chapin had recruited him and Kalmbach was paying him."

The President's lawyer advised him to withhold the names unless he was pressed for them and in his first meeting with F.B.I. agents, Mr. Segretti refused to provide the names on the ground that it would "throw a red herring" into the Watergate investigation.

Mr. Segretti insisted, according to the agents' report, "that his unwillingness to disclose the identities of these individuals is strictly based on his belief that they could not possibly have anything to do with this investigation."

'Not Germane'

During a follow-up interview two days later, he admitted that some of the individuals involved were "prominent political figures," but continued to maintain that his relationship with them was "not germane" to the F.B.I.'s inquiry.

Later, Mr. Segretti telephoned Mr. Dean to report that "his interview had gone very well," and that the agents had "not pressed him in a manner that required him to reveal the names of Strachan, Chapin and Kalmbach."

Mr. Dean said that he heard nothing more about the young man until August, when Mr. Chapin called him in Miami Beach, where he was preparing for the Republican National Convention.

Mr. Segretti, Mr. Chapin said, was "very concerned" about a subpoena that had just been served on him to appear before a Federal grand jury in Washington investigating the Watergate case.

Mr. Dean promptly telephoned Henry E. Petersen, then the Justice Department official in charge of the grand jury investigation, and told him of Mr. Segretti's involvement with the three men—a relationship, he pointed out, that would "obviously be quite embarrassing and could cause political problems" if it were disclosed before the November election.

Segretti Comforted

According to the Dean testimony, Mr. Petersen replied "that he understood the problem and would determine what he could do." When Mr. Segretti arrived in Florida, on the way to his grand jury appearance in Washington, Mr. Dean comforted him by saying that the Government was not "particularly interested in pursuing the names of Strachan, Chapin and Kalmbach in connection with his activities," and that he "doubted if he [Segretti] would be asked any questions."

Mr. Petersen later told him, Mr. Dean said, that the principal Assistant United States Attorney, Earl J. Silbert, "had tried to avoid getting into this area," but that one of the grand jurors had asked Mr. Segretti for the names of his superiors "despite the fact that the prosecutors had tried to gloss it over."

The F.B.I. promptly scheduled interviews with the three men Mr. Segretti had named, causing both Mr. Chapin and Mr. Strachan "great concern," Mr. Dean said, that they might have to reveal Mr. Haldeman's involvement in the Segretti operation.

At one point, Mr. Dean recalled, "Strachan came into my office [and] said that he would,

if necessary, perjure himself to prevent involving Haldeman in this matter."

In his F.B.I. interviews, and according to published excerpts of his grand jury testimony last April, Mr. Chapin maintained that he and Mr. Strachan had been entirely responsible for hiring Mr. Segretti, and that he himself had arranged with Mr. Kalmbach to finance the undercover operation.

When a skeptical prosecutor questioned Mr. Chapin's authority to budget the money for Mr. Segretti's activities, he shot back, "I had the authority to plan a Presidential trip to China. I sure as hell had the authority to go and do some other things."

Mr. Strachan, 29, conceded to the grand jury that Mr. Haldeman's approval for the operation had been sought, but only after he and Mr. Chapin, 32, had set it in motion on their own authority.

But an internal White House summary of the Segretti affair, written by a Presidential aide, Richard Moore, and provided to the Senate Watergate committee by Mr. Dean, suggests that the sabotage effort had been approved by Mr. Haldeman in advance.

According to the memorandum, Mr. Chapin and Mr. Strachan were told by an individual referred to only as "W" that they "should go ahead and implement" the operation. Senate sources have identified "W" as Mr. Haldeman.

Other Inconsistencies

There were other puzzling inconsistencies.

In his initial F.B.I. interview last August, Mr. Chapin acknowledged that he was aware that Mr. Segretti had been responsible for publishing "false scheduling information" relating to the Muskie campaign.

But in follow-up interviews earlier this year, Mr. Chapin recanted, telling agents that he had believed the handbills referred to by Mr. Segretti had been legitimate ones passed out by the Senator's own campaign workers.

One Justice Department official, noting the contradiction between the first and later accounts, said it seemed as if Mr. Chapin "had read six-twelve" in the intervening period.

He referred to Section 612 of Title 18, United States Code—the statute, under which Mr. Segretti has been indicted, that prohibits the dissemination of false or unsigned campaign literature.

Press Office "Frenzy"

The Republican sabotage effort first surfaced in news reports last Oct. 10 that revealed the sketchy outline of the Segretti operation.

After a second spy story appeared on Sunday, Oct. 15, alleging Mr. Chapin's involvement in the operation, the White House press office was thrown into a "frenzy," according to Mr. Dean, who said he was forced to cut short his

honeymoon and return to Washington that same day.

When he reached the White House, a meeting between Mr. Chapin and four other top Nixon aides was already under way—a "practice session," Mr. Dean said, to prepare the Presidential press secretary, Ronald L. Ziegler, to answer questions the next day on the Chapin-Segretti development.

As John D. Ehrlichman, then Mr. Nixon's top adviser on domestic matters, and the other men played the role of hostile reporters, Mr. Ziegler was led through alternative responses that ranged from a fairly dull disclosure of the facts to the position that any comment at all would "dignify desperation politics."

Guilt by Association

At the next morning's White House press briefing, Mr. Ziegler chose the last alternative, characterizing the story linking Mr. Chapin to the Segretti operation as "hearsay, innuendo and guilt by association."

A short time later, Mr. Dean said, Mr. Ehrlichman suggested that Mr. Segretti, whose name means "secrets" in Italian, "go incognito and hide from the press" until after the election, which he did, surfacing three weeks later in Palm Springs, Calif., near where he had been hiding in the desert.

Two days after the November election, Mr. Dean was dispatched to Palm Springs to interrogate Mr. Segretti. The following day, he took a tape recording of the session to Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Ehrlichman in Key Biscayne, Fla., where they had accompanied the President on a post-election vacation.

Mr. Dean played the tape recording back for the two men. Four days later he learned that "the President had made a decision . . . Mr. Chapin would have to leave the White House staff."

The cover-up of the Segretti affair continued, however. In January, Mr. Ziegler announced that Mr. Chapin had decided to resign from the White House to accept a "fine" offer from United Air Lines, and he made what he described as a "general, broad, sweeping, all-encompassing" denial that Mr. Haldeman or any other White House official had requested Mr. Chapin's resignation.

Mr. Strachan resigned in April as general counsel of The United States Information Agency, where he had gone after leaving The White House earlier this year.

To this day, the White House has never publicly admitted that the Segretti operation carried its imprimatur.