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That 1970 Plan

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By William V. Shannon

WASHINGTON, July 19—Of the many Watergate disclosures, one it seems to me has been somewhat misinterpreted. That is the plan for increased intelligence on internal subversion which President Nixon approved in July, 1970, and dropped after F.B.I. Director J. Edgar Hoover objected.

Much is still not known about the motives and interplay of personalities in that affair, and may never be known. In the absence of a candid explanation from the White House, Mr. Nixon has been widely depicted as a profascist and the late Mr. Hoover, unexpectedly and inexplicably, as a posthumous liberal hero. The truth is probably a good deal more complicated and ambiguous.

The abandoned plan was worked up by Tom Charles Huston, then a White House aide, who chaired an inter-agency committee made up of heads of the F.B.I., Central Intelligence Agency, Defense Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency, and each of the military intelligence services. The plan called for increased use of electronic surveillance and opening mail and burglarizing homes and offices of suspected individuals, whether American citizens or foreign nationals and diplomats.

These are ugly and illegal methods. Since Mr. Nixon personally approved their use in violation of his oath of office to uphold the law, it is at least arguable that his action provides grounds for impeachment.

But having said that, in fairness, one also has to say that each of Mr. Nixon's several predecessors at least as far back as Franklin D. Roosevelt might also be subject to impeachment on the same grounds. Their culpability,

however, would be hard to establish. They gave their approval with a wink or a nod or by silently accepting the successful results of an F.B.I. investigation without inquiring how such remarkable information had been obtained. They were shrewd enough to keep their distance and leave disagreeable details to their Attorneys General.

What was unusual about the 1970 plan was the greatly widened scope of the intelligence-gathering and the fact that there was a young ideologue on the White House staff so indiscreet as to be writing memoranda to the President about unlawful techniques. But there was nothing really new or unprecedented in the methods proposed in the 1970 plan. They had at various times in the past been used against native Communists, gangsters and foreign agents.

The Huston memorandum setting forth the committee's recommendations makes this clear. With regard to "surreptitious entry," for example, the memorandum states: "The F.B.I., in Mr. Hoover's younger days, used to conduct such operations with great success and with no exposure. The information secured was invaluable."

These irregular methods were used only in what the F.B.I. deemed important cases and Mr. Hoover tried to control their use tightly. He was always fearful that they would be exposed and his personal reputation and that of the bureau harmed. With advancing age and intensifying megalomania, Hoover became more fearful.

Clyde Tolson, Hoover's long-time intimate and colleague, used to say "The Director is going to go down in history as the greatest American of the twentieth century, and we mustn't do anything to jeopardize that."

This was an estimate of himself that Mr. Hoover shared. In the mid-

1960's, he gradually discontinued unlawful methods. By then he was less concerned with getting results in particular cases and more preoccupied with protecting his image. For that reason and not because he had suddenly been converted into a strict civil libertarian, Hoover fought the White House in 1970 when it tried to get him to revive these risky and illegal means. Old men do not like risks.

A fascinating unanswered question is how Mr. Hoover was able to make Mr. Nixon kill the plan five days after he first approved it. After all, young Mr. Huston did not convene the heads of all the intelligence agencies for weeks of meetings on his own initiative. He was acting on the President's orders and reflecting the President's deep fear of hostile demonstrators and incipient domestic terrorism. Hoover had to change Mr. Nixon's own mind.

Did Mr. Hoover know something discreditable about Mr. Nixon's past that enabled him to blackmail him as he did many other politicians? Or did he merely hint that he would "leak" this plan to the press? However he carried his point, it is clear that he did not convince Mr. Nixon on the merits. Less than a year later, the President set up his own intelligence-gathering unit in the White House, the "plumbers." One of their first assignments was to burglarize the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist.

Mr. Nixon thus made the fatal error which his predecessors carefully sidestepped. In his frustration with Mr. Hoover and his own obsession with internal security, Mr. Nixon took the onus of irregular, unlawful methods directly upon himself.

William V. Shannon is substituting for James Reston, who is on vacation.