

The possibility of Central Intelligence Agency involvement in Watergate is just titillating enough and, in the anything's possible atmosphere of President Nixon's Washington, just credible enough to have attained a certain currency. But is there anything to it, apart from the agency's known and confessed "mistakes" in providing a wig and other gear and a psychological profile to the White House team stalking Daniel Ellsberg? Ex-White House aide Charles Colson, before he went to jail, suggested that the CIA was involved up to the hilt and was somehow blackmailing Mr. Nixon. Those hospitable to conspiracy theories may find his tale persuasive. Others must find it bizarre, not only unproven but internally weak. Sen. Howard H. Baker (R-Tenn.), vice chairman of the Senate Watergate Committee, however, is in the circumstances a more substantial fellow. His report on his search for the CIA role, "if any," in Watergate is now in, and it deserves serious notice.

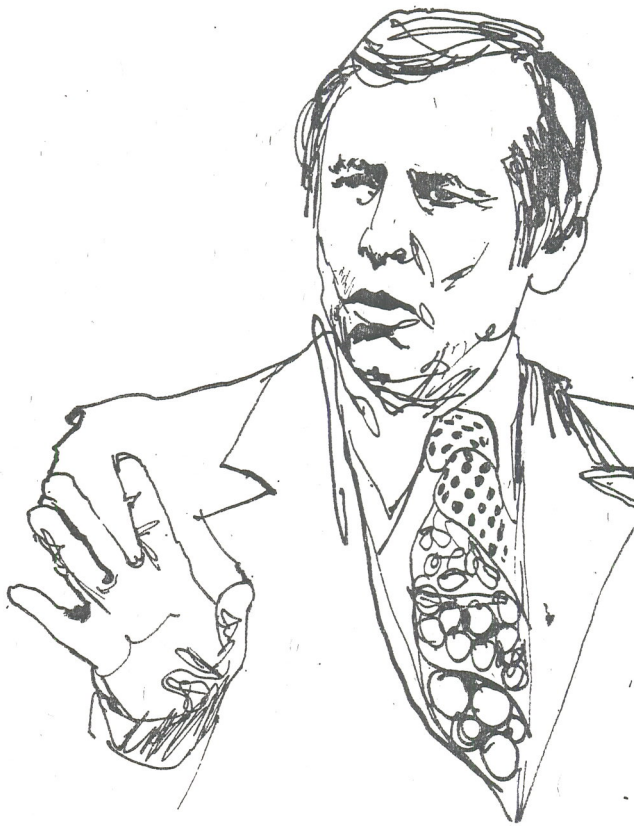
When Sen. Baker first undertook his inquiry, it will be recalled, the question arose whether he was looking for the facts or for an alibi for Mr. Nixon. The President, after all, in order to justify restrictions he put on the FBI's initial Watergate probe, had suggested on May 22, 1973: "Within a few days . . . I was advised that there was a possibility of CIA involvement in some way . . . I also had to be deeply concerned with insuring that neither the covert operations of the CIA nor the operations of the special investigations unit [the plumbers] should be compromised." Mr. Baker, however, does not seem at any time to have asked who advised Mr. Nixon of possible CIA involvement or on what basis or to what purpose — a glaring lapse. Rather, the senator, by interrogating CIA sources, attempted himself to find a CIA-Watergate link.

Did he find one? Reading the Baker report before its release, CIA Director William E. Colby complained in pain to the senator that the report "implies that there is reason to believe that the Agency and its officers and employees had prior knowledge of and were wittingly involved in the [Watergate and Ellsberg] break-ins and the coverup." The report does indeed so imply. But it only implies. It does not establish or prove. Sen. Baker himself, in releasing the report, pointedly refrained from concluding anything and underlined the point by laying out extensive avenues for inquiry by others. Does this formal refusal to charge or clear the CIA, on grounds of inadequate evidence, show a proper caution on Mr. Baker's part? Or does it show a certain questionable unwillingness to stop waving a red herring?

The fact is that the secrecy in which the CIA necessarily operates not only may make possible its involvement but may make impossible its exoneration. To cite a typical instance, the Baker report states that documents which a CIA operative claimed to have seen Mrs. James McCord destroy in her home "might show a link between McCord and the CIA." But how is an outsider to know when the CIA is acting to evade responsibility and when it is acting in accordance with its charter to protect intelligence sources and methods? The ambiguity lies in the nature of a secret intelligence agency.

Perhaps the most intriguing detail of the Baker report concerns the "WH flap." The term was used by Robert Bennett, head of a public relations agency then thickly tied to the CIA, and he thought it meant "White House flap." But—no. In fact, it meant "Western Hemisphere flap" and involved a former CIA operative in Latin America who quit in disenchantment in 1969, subsequently visited Cuba, and now plans to publish a confessional book. This is a juicy story in itself. Mr. Baker's report, however, states that the CIA has not "explained the significance of same to Watergate developments." The report does not seem to consider the possibility that the "WH flap" may have no significance for Watergate, although on the face of it that seems to be precisely the case.

Sen. Baker began his investigation by saying that the matter put him in mind of "animals crashing around in the forest—you can hear them but you can't see them." Well, you can hear them still. But you still can't see them. All you can see is Mr. Baker crashing after them. The senator's own Watergate Committee is closing shop. He would like the standing CIA-oversight committees to continue his probe, but there is no sign either that they will or that, if they did, they could or would tell the public more. Mr. Baker, we conclude, has done a difficult job unsatisfactorily. He has neither resolved the issue he undertook to investigate nor removed doubts about his own approach to it. Perhaps it was an effort worth making anyway. But considering the way the effort was made, we're not even sure there is that much to be said for it.



By Bill Oakes