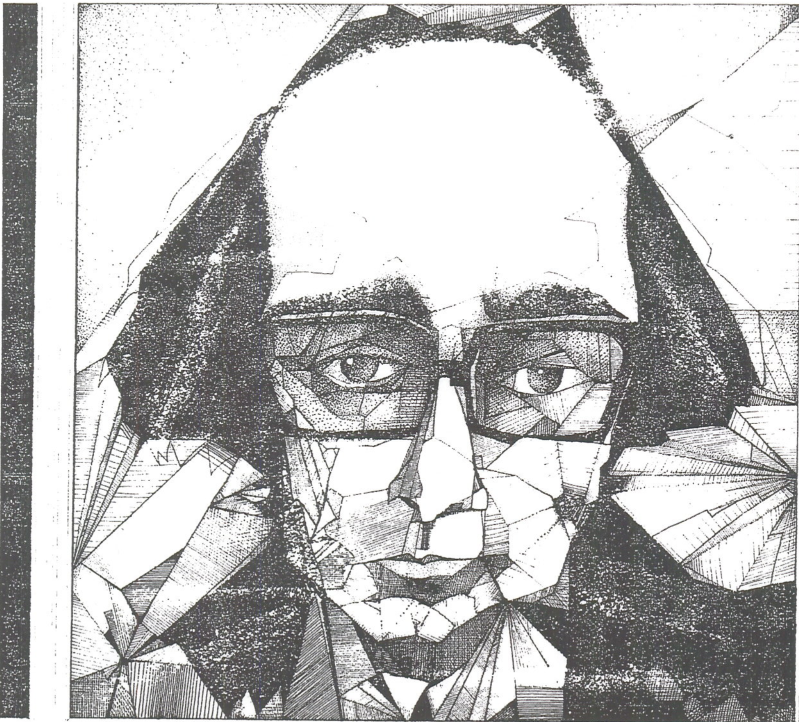
Bo Burlingham

PARANOIA IN POWER

In which Tom Charles Huston tells an ex-Weatherman how he failed to outsmart the FBI's Badge No. 1—and thereby inspired the White House Plumbers



Vint Lawrence

On the dais, Tom Charles Huston tamped his pipe, leaned back in his chair, and surveyed the assemblage with the look of a classics professor whose course has been overenrolled with football players. Seventy-five, maybe 100 conservative stalwarts had gathered in the Benjamin Franklin Hotel of Philadelphia—an odd assortment of urchins, housewives, and pasty-faced ideologues discussing Watergate in nervous and distracted tones. They had come to listen to the man whom President Nixon had selected in June 1970 to coordinate a massive assault on street fighters, pig callers, bomb planters, anarchists, arsonists, and rioters. Huston was then twenty-nine, and rash enough to challenge J. Edgar Hoover for control of the internal-security apparatus. With one swat, however, old Badge Number One had wrecked the upstart's "domestic spy plan" and his government career as well. In June 1971 Huston returned to his native Indiana to practice law in obscurity until John Dean absconded from the White House with his top-secret memoranda. Now he was in Philadelphia to talk to the local Young Americans for Freedom on "Government Surveillance of Private Citizens: Necessary or Ominous?"—which seemed to me a little like Meyer Lansky discussing business ethics with a group of jukebox salesmen.

I myself was anything but a casual observer, having run riot with the Weathermen back when Huston was stalking the New Left. Until scarcely six weeks earlier, moreover, I had been under indictment for conspiracy to "use bombs, destructive devices, and explosives to destroy police installations and other civic, business, and educational buildings throughout the country and to kill and injure persons therein." A federal grand jury in Detroit brought the charges on July 23, 1970, the same day that the Huston Plan went into effect. Three years later, publicity about the plan prompted Federal Judge Damon J. Keith to order a hearing into possible government misconduct, such as mail tampering. The intelligence agencies bridled, warning that any such inquest might disclose "vital national-security information," and so on October 15, 1973, the Justice Department moved to dismiss the indictment.

Shortly thereafter, I telephoned Huston and told him of my interest in his reflections on the political crisis of 1969 and 1970. Huston had been there, the resident White House expert on the New Left in the most turbulent year of a turbulent decade. He had had a hand in formulating administration strategy for ridding the country of public enemies like me and my cohorts. It does not often happen that the quail gets the chance to discuss old times with the hound, and something about it appealed to both of us. "You know," said the hound, "I've wondered myself about what exactly has changed between then and now."

As we talked long-distance, his curiosity heightened my own. "I've been reading that new book on SDS," he told me, "and I don't know if it's accurate, but I was interested to learn that you people were frustrated because nobody was listening to you. You know, we felt the same thing at the White House. It seemed as though a momentous crisis was at hand, and nobody was aware of it or cared." At length, he invited me to meet him in Philadelphia, and so—on that December morning—I found myself among the Young Americans for Freedom in the Commodore Barry Room of the Benjamin Franklin Hotel.

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HUSTON WAS INTRODUCED to enthusiastic applause as a former White House aide. With great precision and considerable detachment, he outlined the problem of dealing with internal-security threats, discussed the issue historically and theoretically, and then launched into a description of the situation that confronted the administration in 1969 and 1970. He knew the statistics, and he laid them out like a card sharp showing a straight flush: bomb scares, actual bombings, schools shut down, arrests, National Guard alerts, burnings of ROTC buildings, police injured, police killed, civilians killed, sniping incidents. ("My God," I thought, "were we really as close to full-scale insurrection as we allowed ourselves to believe?")

"Looking back," he said, "it is easy to understand why people now think that the administration overreacted. And had I known at the time that, if we had done nothing, the problem would just go away, I would have recommended that we do nothing. But we did not understand that it would go away, and I don't think that any reasonable person could have known this. Something had to be done."

He paused, then continued. "In the last analysis, I suppose this is an example of the dangers of letting down your guard against increased executive power—no matter what the circumstances. Not that the danger was not real, but in this case the risk of the remedy was as great as the disease. There was a willingness to accept without challenge the Executive's claim to increased power. That's why we acted as we did, and it was a mistake."

Huston was the soul of reason, and I could not suppress a certain respect for the man. Had Nixon been able to muster up half so much candor, I thought, he would have come through Watergate like a water lily: wet but sweet-smelling. (Huston's candor did have limits, however. When I later asked him for a copy of his speech, he declined on advice of counsel. "I don't want to misquote you," I said. "But if I don't give you a copy of the speech," he countered, "I can always say you misquoted me." Deniability.)

As Huston resumed his seat on the dais, another speech began. If it interested him at all, he did not let it show. And when, at length, the audience began to ask questions, he was curt in his comments, answering in barbed monosyllables. Challenged by one critic about the wisdom of the 1970 plan, he replied, "Clearly you should have been there instead of me." He seemed impatient for it to end.

Then a middle-aged, red-haired woman stood on the far side of the room. She appeared overwrought. "I want to tell you, Mr. Huston," she said, "that I agree with you 100 percent. *One hundred percent!* When a kid has got a knife stuck in your back, you don't set up a commission and call in the professors. You don't talk about how it is all a product of poor upbringing. No, sir." There was laughter. Huston showed interest and leaned forward in his chair "I want to tell you something. My boy was playing in the neighborhood," she sputtered, "and this kid down the block kept beating up on him, threatening him, and all that. And so I got pretty upset. I spoke to the mother and she wouldn't do nothing. *Nothing!* So then I called in the police. There's another bunch of idiots!" More laughter. For the first time, the air crackled with excitement. People craned their necks to see the redheaded woman. "So these dumb cops hemmed and hawed and did nothing. *Nothing!* It was a private matter they said. *A private matter!* So I had just about had it. It was *my* kid that was taking the lumps." She moved around as if, at that very moment, she were once again about to take matters into her own hands. "I walk to my closet. I take out a baseball bat. I give it to my kid. I say, 'Here, you handle that punk.'" Laughter, applause, cheers throughout the room.

Huston, by this point, was standing and wanted to speak, but he could not get a word in. Behind me a woman was yelling, "Hooray for Watergate! Hooray for Watergate! I'd do it myself." The red-haired woman shouted over the hubbub, which immediately subsided to a murmur. "Well, my boy *did* handle that kid. And after that, you know what? The kid's mother comes down the street all in a tizzy. *Now* she's angry. Not when my kid's getting it, but when *her* kid gets it. So you know what I do? I go at *her* with a baseball bat." By this time, the audience was agitated to a fever pitch. Huston was motioning to get the

floor. To my rear, the Watergate woman was leaning over the chair in front of her, gesticulating frantically with her forefinger. "Hooray for Watergate! Hooray for Liddy! Hooray for Hunt! I'd do it myself. Hooray for Watergate!" All around me, people cheered and talked excitedly.

Finally, Huston gained control. No longer was there the slightest trace of boredom or condescension in his manner. *This* was serious. This woman had touched on something important. "I'd like to say that this really goes to the heart of the problem. Back in 1970, one thing that bothered me most was that it seemed as though the only way to solve the problem was to hand out baseball bats. In fact, it was already beginning to happen. There was the Panther shoot-out in Chicago. I looked into it, and, as far as I could tell, the police had just taken the law into their own hands and killed those two Panther leaders. Now, the question was, how best to handle this kind of situation. *Something* had to be done. And out of it came the Plumbers and then a progression to Watergate. Well, I think that it's the best thing that ever happened to this country that it got stopped when it did. We faced up to it. People got caught, including many whom I know well. But I want you to know, and I can tell you truthfully, that they are not evil people. They just made mistakes."

Mistakes, yes, I thought, but things were more complicated than that.

WE HAD MET in the hotel lobby earlier that morning. Like enemy soldiers fraternizing during a cease-fire, we approached each other with a blend of cool caution and intense curiosity. He shook my hand and suggested we have breakfast in the basement cafeteria. Over eggs and coffee, we drifted from one banality to another, out of a mutual need—I suppose—to reconnoiter our positions, size each other up, and test the strength of old loyalties and hostilities.

In the midst of these maneuvers, two of his friends joined us. Huston introduced us by name but did not give rank or serial number, although I later found out that one of them, David Keene, was, like Huston himself, a former national chairman of Young Americans for Freedom. The other, Don Devine, taught political science at the University of Maryland and had been one of Huston's conservative mentors. Casting stealthy glances my way, they sat down to order breakfast and quickly became embroiled in an argument with the waitress. "People like that are the best argument I know of for unemployment," muttered Huston. I kept my tongue and took the lay of the land.

In a bizarre way, the landmarks looked familiar. The night before, the three had talked until late about the plight of Richard Nixon. "What do you think?" I asked.

"Frankly, I wouldn't put anything past him and those damn technocrats," Huston replied. "If Nixon told them to nationalize the railroads, they'd have nationalized the railroads. If he'd told them to exterminate the Jews, they'd have exterminated the Jews."

Huston, Keene, and Devine, I soon gathered, were elder statesmen of the conservative movement who had survived numerous faction fights, risen to the YAF leadership, and graduated to national politics in the Nixon era. Like me, they are men of the 1960s, and—despite our ideological differences—we share certain assumptions about those years. "It was a period totally unique in our history," Huston said. "I have searched for comparable eras, and the only one that compares at all is the 1850s—Bleeding Kansas, the abolitionists, and all that. We experienced a whole upheaval in the way we saw ourselves."

LIKE MANY OF our contemporaries, Huston and I had begun at the center and moved out. He was the son of an insurance man from Logansport, Indiana, who died when Huston was only sixteen. In 1959 he entered Indiana University. Casting aside his youthful liberalism, he threw himself into conservative politics and, in 1961, founded the local chapter of Young Americans for Freedom. His sharp mind and quick tongue moved him rapidly up the organization, first as state president, then national vice-chairman, and finally, in 1965, national chairman. By that time he had received his B.A. and was studying at Indiana University law school.

I had entered Princeton Univer-

sity in the fall of 1964, an admirer of Lyndon Johnson, whose picture decorated my dormitory wall. A year later the poster came down, and my radicalization followed the classic pattern: identification with the civil-rights movement, concern about the Vietnam war, hostility to my alma mater. In the fall of 1967, I went to France on a Fulbright grant and was in Paris for *les événements* of May 1968—a brief dream of barricades and revolution come true. Late that summer I returned to America.

Huston, meanwhile, had completed law school and joined the Army, where he was trained in intelligence work. Assigned to Pentagon duties, he found spare moments to boost the Presidential campaign of Richard Nixon, and when he left the service in January 1969, a job awaited him across the Potomac at the Executive Office Building. He took it "believing that things were finally going to be set straight."

I myself believed that things could scarcely have looked grimmer. That summer I visited Cuba with a delegation led by Bernardine Dohrn. We met representatives of the Vietnamese liberation forces, who impressed me as humane and seasoned veterans of a struggle most of them had been waging all their lives. They exuded a kind of mellow fortitude and provided me with a model to which I could aspire. But what was noble courage in Cuba became desperate courage in America. On my return, I was ready for well-nigh total commitment to the revolution, prepared to risk all for all. For the next six months, I ran with the Weathermen.

FOUR YEARS HAD PASSED since then, and I was sipping coffee at the Benjamin Franklin Hotel while Tom Charles Huston asked me, "Why did you join the Weathermen? You know, where did you draw your inspiration?"

"Vietnam," I answered without hesitating.

It surprised him. "Vietnam," he mused. "I would have thought the black movement was more important. Vietnam is so far away."

His comment struck me as strange. Where had he spent those years that Vietnam was so far away? I remember living with it every day, until Vietnam became something more than a Southeast Asian war, spreading out from Indochina, as it were, to absorb and penetrate and reinforce other conflicts around the world—between black and white, young and old, rich and poor, old and new, good and bad. History, it seemed, was moving toward a watershed, and fate had cast us as revolutionaries in the last bastion of the *ancien régime*. During the dark days of 1969, we felt like miners, trapped in a terrible poisonous shaft with no light to guide us out. We resolved to destroy the tunnel even if we risked destroying ourselves in the process. It all seemed simple and terrifying.

And so we had organized into tight, closed collectives that bolstered our commitment, and also shut us off from the world outside. In our Weather enclaves, we wrestled with fear and despair, criticizing each other mercilessly for any flagging of the faith. Later we grew lax in our collective life, but the system continued to shield us from foreign pressure and doubt. To what actual purpose? Most of us did not think the question through dispassionately. If we did, we hoped that the crazed violence of outraged youth would at least bring indirect pressure on the Nixon administration to moderate its course. At most, we were the wave of the future.

By then, I think, the turmoil of the 1960s had created a climate in America in which cynicism about the law had become contagious. The more the government bent and twisted the law over Vietnam, the more we flouted it in our antiwar actions and the more the silent majority was predisposed to bending or suspending law in the name of order. In the end, the expectation that the administration would quell dissidence by any means necessary was midwife to the deed. We wrote off civil liberties and took to shouting "Fire!" in crowded theaters. Huston asked me whether I would have acted the way he did had I been in his position. I had to admit that I would have done the same thing. "I was a true believer then," Huston told me, "in the same way, I'm sure, that you were. True believers convince themselves that the world is black and white, but I've since learned that generally it's very rare that you find things are black and white."

At the time, he had been working in a collective of his own in Washington, D.C., and they, too, felt under siege. "Yes, I guess you could say there was a siege mentality," he recalled, "but not from the revolutionary protest movement. Oh, the demonstrations had some impact, but mainly it came from the liberal Democrats, who never accepted the legitimacy of the Nixon Presidency. From the very beginning, we felt the pressure from the media, Congress, and, most important, the bureaucracy, which was solidly Democratic. That was critical. You could make a decision and hand down the orders, but if you didn't fight tooth and nail, the bureaucracy would just ignore it. I know cases where the administration would decide on policy, and it was simply never carried out." (Small wonder, I thought, that they eventually used against the Democrats some of the same tools they had developed against the radical Left.)

DURING THAT FIRST YEAR, Huston wrote speeches for Richard Nixon and handled an assortment of mundane chores. In his spare moments, he followed the Movement from afar; certainly no one else near the President could keep track of SDS as it splintered into factions. It was only natural that when the Movement took an ominous turn in the fall of 1969, the inner circle should call on Huston to help coordinate domestic-security affairs. "I took part in the preparations for the November moratorium," he said. "We had a committee, which Egil Krogh headed, and our job was to make sure we were ready for the various contingencies, keep in touch with the police, that sort of thing."

I smiled and nodded, for I myself served in the Weather contingent at the moratorium. All in all, we considered it a terrific success. Earlier we had felt isolated, but in Washington we trashed alongside hundreds—could it have been thousands?—of anonymous young street fighters, first in an abortive march on the South Vietnamese Embassy, and then following a militant rally at the Justice Department. "I'm dreaming of a white riot," we sang to the tune of "White Christmas"—suddenly delirious with visions of a revolutionary youth movement. No less a personage than John Mitchell confirmed our assessment.

According to the newspapers, the Attorney General told his wife that it "looked like a Russian Revolution going on." If we had been ballet dancers and he had compared us to the Bolshoi, he could not have done more to bolster our spirits.

Huston took another view. "It was ridiculous," he said. "Mitchell and those people just didn't know what was happening. Some paint was thrown at the building and somebody peed on the lawn, and Martha Mitchell got all upset. So he announced that he was going to get the New Mobe for crossing state lines to foment a riot." I recalled press accounts that the administration had been contemplating riot-conspiracy charges against the Old Left leaders of the New Mobilization Committee, who had denounced the violence, hadn't wanted it, and resented our role in it. "I knew," Huston went on, "that no charges were going to stick on some absurd business like that. I asked the FBI for a report on New Mobe involvement with any violence during the moratorium, and they bore me out 100 percent. I sent the report to Bob Haldeman, and that was the last I heard of it."

Huston understood—as Mitchell did not— that the antiwar movement had given birth to a rebellious offspring which he calls the "revolutionary protest movement." As a matter of strategy, the New Mobe wanted to create a massive, peaceful presence in Washington. We, on the other hand, were looking for a Winter Palace to storm. "We knew about the march on the Vietnamese Embassy," he told me, "and we certainly didn't want an international incident. The police understood that our main concern was to contain the action. That's what they did."

Judging by his recollections, Huston never thought the revolutionary prospect very menacing—an assessment I found vaguely insulting, if accurate. "The real threat to internal security—in any society— is repression," he had told a *New York Times* interviewer. "A handful of people can't frontally overthrow the government. But if they can engender enough fear, they can generate an atmosphere that will bring out of the woodwork every repressive demagogue in the country."

I wondered to myself what role hindsight played in his current nonchalance, since the administration

had, after all, resorted to extraordinary measures against the radical Left, not the radical Right. Did anyone else share his view? He shrugged. "The senior people at Justice didn't understand the problem," he said. "As for the President, he never sat down to work out a calculated policy on the Movement. Frankly, it was all I could do at times to get his attention or the attention of his top aides. He would run hot and cold, depending on what was happening and whom he talked to. One day he'd call everybody in and pound the desk and say, 'We've got to stop this violence.' Then he would lose all interest. Weeks would go by before I could get him to listen again.

"You remember how we used to have buses around the White House during the mobilizations?" I nodded. "It was an effective way to keep the demonstrators back. But then one day the President decided he didn't want to have the buses there, because they obstructed his view or some such reason. So the word came down—no buses.

"This got me worried, since I knew perfectly well that the first demonstrator over the fence would be dead. The Secret Service had orders to shoot, if necessary, and they would not miss. I told Ehrlichman it was crazy to get rid of the buses. Their purpose wasn't to protect the President but to protect the demonstrators, and it just wouldn't be too cool to have some kid killed on the White House lawn. But they let the decision stand anyway." I am not sure whether this story illustrates ineptitude or malevolence, but it does explain a change in policy that long baffled veterans of the Washington marches.

As our talk went on, Huston would poke around for information about the "revolutionary protest movement" that had loomed so large in his career. What moved us? What inspired us? What were we after? Why, in the end, did the Weathermen go underground?

I frankly do not know the full answer, for I was not privy to the leadership discussions that preceded the move. But I do recall our gloom that winter as Nixon enunciated his tough line on Vietnam and the police launched attacks on Black Panther strongholds. Huston himself had viewed the killing of Fred Hampton as a vigilante action by the Chicago police—a conclusion we found all too plausible. Both for him in the White House and for us in our collectives, it had conjured up visions of police death squads and civil war, and so, in our different ways, we had all prepared for stormy weather.

On the day after Christmas, 1969, Weatherpeople from all over the country had converged on Flint, Michigan, for what we called a War Council. Billed as a "gathering of the tribes," it became an all-out "Wargasm"—an orgiastic, ritualistic political rally, not without overtones of *morituri te salutamus*. By the time it was over, we knew that Weathermen had begun the trek to America's political badlands, where sooner or later they would arrive as a band of revolutionary outlaws.

Shortly thereafter I left the organization, though not because of political, strategic, or moral disagreements. I had reservations about this long march, but they were offset by my respect for the people who were making it. These were, in fact, among the best people I had known in the Movement; their mistakes and excesses had been my own as well. (I find today that I have none of the embarrassment about my association with them that I sensed in Tom Charles Huston regarding his former colleagues at the White House.) In fact, it was my own stomach for the fugitive life that I doubted. Besides, it seemed as though there were still some things for radicals to do in day-by-day America without joining an outlaw band. And so, in early 1970, I said goodbye to my Weather friends and I have neither seen nor heard from them since.

Now, as we talked, it was my turn to poke around the murky netherworld of internal security, in hopes of catching some glimpse of the phantoms that had haunted us back in 1969 and 1970. What Huston recounted, however, was not a tale of cloak-and-dagger intrigue but the story of a bureaucratic power play, aimed at dislodging J. Edgar Hoover as intelligence mogul for domestic affairs.

The Old Man, it seems, was getting crotchety, or so his critics charged, and he was hard to get along with. "He wouldn't cooperate with *anybody*," said Huston. "He wanted to do things his own way, and to hell with everyone else. It was an extremely serious situation. He wouldn't even *talk* to Helms."

Huston had once idolized Hoover as the archetypal "100 percenter," and he approached their first meeting with the reverence an acolyte might accord an audience with the Pope. "I was Mr. Greenass," he chuckled. "The first thing they told me was, 'With Mr. Hoover, you can never be too humble.' Well, normally I don't act that way, but with Mr. Hoover I *was* humble. You know, he was the last reigning monarch in the Western world. And it's damn lucky he was there, because a guy who was less restrained than he would have been a serious threat." At the time, however, Huston thought him altogether too restrained. Despite all his warnings about the new revolutionary menace, Hoover would not take heed, and gradually it dawned on Huston that the Old Man had other thoughts on his mind. "He knew he wasn't going to be around a hell of a lot longer, and he didn't want any kind of scandal that would blemish his waning years. He was worried about his legend. And so he refused to do certain things that twenty years before he'd have done without batting an eye." Hoover would not, for example, let his agents do second-story jobs or search the mails. Likewise, he forbade the recruitment of campus informers under twenty-one years of age, a policy that drastically reduced the FBI's ability to penetrate the New Left. Not that such techniques offended his principles: he never said they were wrong or illegal or unconstitutional. "He'd just sit there and moan about the 'jackals of the press,' and how you had to be careful because, if you weren't, the 'jackals of the press' and the civil-liberties people would jump down your back and raise hell."

By early 1970, more and more people believed that Hoover had to go. Then came the first wave of radical bombings, followed close on by the Cambodia strike and the killings at Kent State and Jackson State. "We just didn't believe we were getting the whole story," said Huston.

The coup d'etat had been long in the planning stages, the contacts made, the groundwork laid, the

moment of action awaited. In early June, with the guns of May still fresh in the memory, Nixon called on Hoover to head up a committee composed of Hoover's own antagonists—Helms of CIA, Gayler of the National Security Agency, and Bennett of the Defense Intelligence Agency. They were to study the internal-security mess and recommend solutions. To this group he added his own man, Huston, whose purpose was to prevent Hoover from leading the committee astray.

Hoover quickly found himself outmaneuvered and outvoted. Time and again, he tried to forestall the committee from advocating substantial changes in the internal-security apparatus, but Huston beat him back, with the full support of the other members, the staff, and the White House. Their final report urged the President to create what was, in effect, a Domestic Intelligence Board with broad authority. The FBI would fall under its supervision, and although Hoover would head the unit, he would have only one vote. Despite the Old Man's vehement objections, Nixon told Huston to issue a "decision memorandum" putting the plan into effect. As if to mark the end of Hoover's reign, the memo authorized certain activities he had expressly forbidden—notably, "surreptitious entry" and "covert mail coverage."

Accounts differ as to whether the FBI director "hit the roof" or "went through the roof" when he received Huston's memo, but they agree that he landed in the office of Attorney General John Mitchell. There he must have argued persuasively; no doubt he made a threat or two. Whatever he said, it worked, for Mitchell went scurrying to Haldeman, who was quickly convinced to back down. On July 28, Tom Charles Huston, his ears pinned back, went to the White House "situation room" and instructed a staff member to request the intelligence chiefs to return their copies of the decision memorandum.

"There was only one honest way to deal with the problem of Mr. Hoover," Huston continued, "and that was to remove him. But the White House decided for political reasons that they couldn't get rid of him. So they had to set up the Plumbers. I find that totally indefensible." Others have viewed Watergate as the direct descendent of the 1970 domestic spy plan, but Huston traces the lineage differently. The Plumbers, he says, were the bastard offspring of the affair that bears his name, and they in turn gave birth to Watergate. Had Nixon fought for the Huston Plan, he would never have had to set up his own intelligence unit to plug national-security leaks.

But, I pointed out, the White House had dirty tricksters all along. What was to prevent them from hatching the scheme to bug the Democratic National Committee? "I suppose it's possible," he answered. "But Liddy came up with the idea, and he was a Plumber. He just wouldn't have been in a position to get this going if the plan had been operative."

To be sure, Huston defines "Watergate" narrowly, in a way that minimizes his own role. At the time, he says, it was all perfectly legal. "I took the view that in internal-security matters the President had the right to infringe on what would, in other circumstances, be constitutional rights, but that decision encompassed a decision that you forfeit the right to prosecute." In accordance with this notion, he excluded the Justice Department from any involvement with the plan.

But, I asked, if the intelligence was not going to lead to prosecution, what did they intend to do with it? Could they have contemplated Palmer raids? "No, no, no," Huston scoffed. "Everyone [outside the government] was so worried about repression that it was the last thing possible to really do. We had to get some idea of the dimensions and nature of the problem. And then, if your intelligence is good enough, there are ways to stop these acts of violence before they happen. Suppose, for example, that you learn that a group is planning to blow up such-and-such a building. You alert the local authorities. They move in, make arrests, and that's it. It's over before anybody gets hurt.

"You've got to bear in mind," he went on, "that we faced an extraordinary situation requiring an extraordinary response. And, you know, you don't *want* a constitutional or legal mandate for that kind of thing. You don't want to institutionalize the excesses required to meet

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extraordinary threats. The law just can't anticipate all the contingencies."

But if the law can't anticipate all contingencies, neither can it protect us from loose definitions of "national security" and "extraordinary circumstances." Huston admitted that he does not know any better than the rest of us where his plan would have led. Nothing in the recent history of American intelligence gives us reason to take heart.

I COULD NOT HELP but think that Huston was covering his flank with these tortured legalisms. Would he do it differently if he had it to do again? He thought for a moment. "Looking back," he said, "I think I should have advocated the coordination without the special powers. The important thing was to get Hoover out. You know, 99 percent of domestic intelligence comes from legal sources anyway."

Back then, however, Huston had no second thoughts—and no second chance either. His days in Washington were numbered. Though he continued his efforts to resurrect the plan, his memoranda—which once exuded a kind of hopeful determination—became laced with expressions of cynicism and defeat. Seduced and abandoned, he found himself a lonely conservative in an administration controlled, he felt, by apolitical men "whose intellectual tradition is rooted in the philosophy of J. Walter Thompson."

And so, in June 1971, Huston packed up his family and his collection of antique books and furniture and left Washington for points Midwest. There he went to work for the largest law firm in Indianapolis, where he specialized in real-estate matters. Until last year he led a quiet life, withdrawing from electoral politics except to vote—reluctantly—for Nixon in 1972.

Huston now referred to the "corpses Nixon has left strewn around the country over the last twenty-five years," and one could infer that he included his own in the body count. "In the Nixon White House, it was damn tough for a man of ideas to survive," he has written. "For a man of conservative ideas and a modest dose of self-respect, it was virtually impossible."

Since leaving Washington, Huston has rendered a harsh verdict on Nixon's Presidency. Last year he authored an article on it that oozed venom. "As Watergate has demonstrated," he wrote, "you can't begin to compete with the professional Nixonites when it comes to deception." He spoke to me bitterly of the damage Nixon had inflicted on the conservative cause. "The values of a society," he said, "are formed by its people—the priests, philosophers, scientists, writers, lawyers, and so forth. Government can't raise the values; it can only botch them up. This administration has done more to debauch conservative values than anything else in recent history." He spoke like one betrayed, offering no mercy to the traitor.

And yet he had not been an unwilling pawn back in 1970, but rather a central character in Act One of Watergate. How did he evaluate the role he himself had played? "I evaluated it by making a voluntary decision to get out," he snapped, annoyed that I had asked the question. In a less defensive moment, he had written, "If we [conservatives] were not used, we were at least had—and most conspicuously by ourselves."

I suppose I am either fortunate or foolish in having no such regrets about my own sordid past, although I might feel differently today had the underground taken a different turn in 1970. Ironically, while the Nixon administration was setting out on the road to Watergate, the Weatherpeople brought themselves under control, rejecting terrorism for a kind of armed propaganda and developing a sense of responsibility to the Movement we had held in contempt during our brief existence as an overt political groupuscule. Not that they set up a stall in the free marketplace of ideas, but they did decide that the solution was to revolutionize the market rather than to wipe it off the face of the earth. From then until now, they have used their explosive techniques to wantonly damage property after the forces of law and order have wantonly destroyed lives.

I confess that I cheer quietly whenever they succeed. To that extent I am unregenerate, but so, for that matter, is Tom Charles Huston. "From what you tell me," he said, "we didn't do enough back in 1970, if these people are still on the loose." □