



Jack Anderson

THE SILENT MAN of the Watergate conspiracy, G. Gordon Liddy, may soon be set free. Although he won't be eligible for parole until 1981, he has asked the Justice Department to commute his sentence. The request, according to our sources, is under "serious consideration."

The tight-lipped Liddy, a tenacious little man with a Groucho Marx mustache and a macho manner, had flair. Once he held his hand over a burning candle to impress friends.

Another time, he pulled out a pistol and shot out a street light so that Senator George McGovern's presidential headquarters could be observed under proper cover of darkness.

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FOR A MERCIFULLY brief period, Liddy thought he had been instructed by Jeb Magruder to kill me, a mission whose merit he divined automatically and embraced without question. He was on his way to gun me down when he was apprised that he had misunderstood Magruder. Liddy was disturbed over Magruder's imprecision of speech. "Where I come from," he grumbled, "that means a rub-out."

Liddy was drummed off to prison, mouth shut and head erect, for a 21-year sentence. He became known to his fellow inmates at the Danbury, Conn., penitentiary and the Allentown, Pa., prison farm as "Watergate Liddy." The prison records show that he was continued his nontalkative ways.

Liddy won't be eligible for parole until May 1981, after serving eight years, two months. In contrast, the men responsible for Watergate — John Mitchell, H.R. Haldeman and John Erlichman — will be eligible for parole after only 30 months in the slammer.

Lesser Watergate figures, such as former Attorney General Richard Kleindienst, received light, suspended sentences. And, of course, Richard Nixon was pardoned for his White House crimes.

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THE Justice Department has received several letters, meanwhile, urging leniency for Liddy. We have had access to his confidential file.

For instance, Chesterfield Smith, former president of the American Bar Association, wrote: "The sentence given Mr. Liddy ... seems to me to be outrageously out of line with sentences in the federal criminal justice system given to others under similar circumstances." Smith suggested that Liddy received excessive punishment for refusing to squeal on his associates.

Yale law professor Dennis E. Curtis wrote that Liddy's sentence was "... grossly disparate" ... "more than ten times as great as the sentences received by most of the Watergate group."

The final decision whether to commute Liddy's sentence will be up to President Jimmy Carter, who, in the past, has advocated equal sentences for the same crimes.