

San Francisco Chronicle

THE VOICE OF THE WEST

Charles de Young Thieriot, Editor and Publisher
George T. Cameron, Publisher 1925 to 1955
Founded 1865 by Charles and M. H. de Young

SFChronicle

JAN 16 1973

Editorials

Watergate Seven Now Down to Two

THE PLEAS OF GUILT by five of the seven men indicted for the breaking into, entering, bugging and burglarizing of the Watergate headquarters of the Democratic national committee will, according to the Associated Press, "dim the prospects that the full story behind the break-in" will come out in the current trial.

We cannot doubt that the AP is correct in this, for the need of Justice Department prosecutors to present the same case against the two remaining figures as they would have presented against seven is now diminished. In a conspiracy case, fringe figures are often caught in the net thrown for the principals; when the principals are out of the picture, the net need not be thrown.

The two remaining defendants—G. Gordon Liddy, ex-counsel to the Republican campaign committee, and James W. McCord Jr., the committee's security chief—may also be grateful because the five who have confessed their guilt cannot now be obliged to testify. They may of course voluntarily testify, but it would be perhaps naive in the circumstances to count on their coming forward.

WHEN E. HOWARD HUNT JR. pleaded guilty last week just as the Watergate trial was getting under way, his reason — that he could not bear the strain of a long trial in the wake of his wife's death in the recent Chicago airliner accident — seemed entirely convincing. But the caving in yesterday of four other defendants who insisted against their lawyer's advice, on following Hunt's lead raises a certain skepticism.

THIS CONFUSED political espionage operation has been vigorously investigated and prosecuted, thus far, by the Nixon Administration, even though it was presumably someone in the Administration who set it on foot. It has evoked shrieks of outrage and sneers of cynicism, but it is certainly not the first case in which one political party has insinuated its informers into the offices and counsels of another. That is a standard technique in political campaigns, and not necessarily illegal if unaccompanied by bugging and burglary.

What distinguished the Watergate affair was its bumbling stupidity at the outset in both method and planning. There was nothing to learn from the Democratic national committee warranting the risks taken, even if they had not been criminal risks.