

James Reston

Will We Learn Who Backed the Watergate Spies?

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YOU DON'T have to be very smart to figure out what is going to happen to politics in the United States if the confessed burglars in the Watergate case are allowed to cover up who hired them to do the dirty work.

Their explanation of why they broke into and bugged the Democratic party's headquarters here is that they were somehow trying to protect the republic from some Communist conspiracy, but they refused to say where the orders or the money came from.

When E. Howard Hunt Jr., former White House consultant and Central Intelligence agent, pleaded guilty to all seven counts of an indictment charging conspiracy, second degree burglary, and wiretapping, he said: "Anything I may have done I believed to be in the best interests of my country."

Frank Sturgis of Norfolk, Va., also admitted everything except where he got his orders and told the judge: "When it comes to Cuba and the Communist conspiracy involving the United States, I will do anything to protect this country."

Earlier, Bernard L. Barker, another of the men who pleaded guilty, developed much the same line of defense in an interview with the New York Times. Many Cuban refugees, he said, believed that the election of Senator George McGovern as President "would be the beginning of a trend that would lead to socialism or communism, or whatever you want to call it."

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THERE IS, of course, nothing new in people believing that the election of the presidential candidate they oppose will wreck the country. Every Democratic candidate since Franklin Roosevelt has been charged with taking the country down the road to socialism and accepting the support of socialists and Communists.

The new thing in the Watergate case is that former intelligence agents like Hunt, who was operational head of the CIA's Cuban Bay of Pigs disaster and seems to be the clumsiest spy in the business, have actually been using the techniques of espionage to infiltrate the American democratic process and to cover up the source of their orders with claims of patriotic zeal.

The possibilities of this sort of thing in American politics are virtually endless. Nothing is more casual or vulnerable than the headquarters of an American political party or presidential candidate. All of them are staffed by pick-up teams of "volunteers," most of them unknown to the candidate.

In the emotion of the campaign, it is easy to find volunteers who believe the other candidate is a scoundrel who should be defeated by any means in the interests of the country. George Wallace was shot by a man who was posing as one of his supporters. The two Kennedys were killed by men who thought they were serving some higher political purpose by assassination.

The Watergate case, however, was different. Somebody organized and financed the conspiracy, and despite persistent questioning by Chief U. S. District Judge John J. Sirica, he was not able to get the confessed burglars to say who hired them or to give him anything but the standard answers spies are usually instructed to make when they are caught.

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FROM THE beginning, there has been a tendency either to disbelieve the charges in this case or to minimize them as an extension of the normal dirty tricks of American political campaigns. But something more than that is involved in this conspiracy.

For what we are seeing here is the application of the techniques of international espionage to national politics. With the help of new and sensitive listening devices, and the recruitment of men who can be made to believe they are helping some noble cause, we are seeing the development of a kind of political warfare that can destroy the democratic election process.

Not so long ago, politicians could assume that, even in the bitterest of campaigns, there were some things that went beyond the bounds of honor, but now they can't be sure. Accordingly, the Congress can at least drag this dirty business out before the television cameras and let the voters judge for themselves what's been going on, for part of the trouble with the Watergate case all along is that so many people didn't quite believe what was happening.

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