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Perfect Clarification

By Russell Baker

Impressions of what happened in the Watergate affair, recorded after eight months of relatively diligent struggle with the newspapers:

One night last spring three patriots named Hunt, Liddy and McCord fell to talking about what a terrible blow America would suffer if the U.S. Government should ever fall under the sway of a political party that recognized Fidel Castro's regime in Cuba.

McCord said that could never happen here because no such political party existed in America.

"That's what you think," said Liddy. "Have you ever heard of the Democratic party?"

McCord said he hadn't. Neither had Hunt.

Liddy asked them where they had been all their lives.

McCord said he had spent most of his time trying to keep Martha Mitchell from using the telephone, and Hunt said he had been terribly busy writing spy novels.

Liddy told them about the Democratic party and a man named McGovern. They were shocked.

"A man like that, backed up by a political party of that sort," said McCord, "might not be content with recognizing Red Cuba. He could wind up recognizing Red China or signing a sweetheart contract with Red Russia to give them American grain cheap."

They agreed that the Democratic party had to be stopped from selling out America and went to the Watergate where they were arrested for breaking and entering.

Nothing more would have been heard of the whole thing, which was just good fun of the sort politicians are always having with each other, except for the Eastern press and television which had been down on President Nixon ever since 1962 when he told them they wouldn't have him to kick around anymore.

These elitist gossip dispensers tried to build this amusing caper into an important news story by suggesting that somebody at the White House had been involved in it.

As luck would have it, John Mitchell had to quit as the President's right-hand man at about this time because he needed more time at home to keep a firm hand on the telephone, but certain small-minded people suggested it was because he had had something to do with the Watergate.

Mitchell denied everything. Everybody, in fact, denied everything. Ronald Ziegler denied everything with great regularity, Dwight Chapin and

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H. R. Haldeman denied everything on television, and even President Nixon must have denied everything at some point, although that may have been something else he was denying everything about:

Who was Dwight Chapin? Or should it be, who is Dwight Chapin? And if it is, then who is Segretti? Did Segretti, in fact, have garage space for his Maserati at the White House, or was Maserati keeping his Segretti at the Howard Johnson's across the street from the Watergate?

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The question of Chapin's identity hung on for months until Chapin quit the White House for the airlines business, and after that it didn't seem to matter, since it would have been denied anyhow.

The important thing about Chapin was that he knew Segretti, who came from California and had attended one of those orange-juice colleges where they cut their teeth on dirty politics at the fraternity house and then go into the C.I.A. or big-time advertising.

Nobody has ever discovered who Segretti was, which was just as well, because the F.B.I. was leaking everything it learned either to the White House or Senator Sam Ervin.

Naturally, this angered Judge Sirica. Nothing at all was being leaked to him. Nobody would even say anything for the record in his courtroom, and the White House denied it all.

When John Dean was discovered on the White House staff, newspaper readers were incredulous, for they had assumed that he was locked in the secret safe in the secret White House office assigned to Hunt. (If you have forgotten Hunt, go back to the beginning and start over.)

Dean told the F.B.I. he didn't know what was in Hunt's safe, but said its contents did not include him, Dean.

F.B.I. Acting Director Gray told several Senators that Dean "gives me the willies," and explained, "He's got the smell of Hunt's White House safe all over him."

To clear up all the confusion, President Nixon announced that the White House had nothing to hide and ordered everybody on the White House staff to keep his mouth shut unless he had an okay from Marlon Brando to talk.

Senator Ervin wanted to arrest a lot of people for contempt, instead of incompetence.

Tomorrow: How to tell Lon Nol and Souvanna Phouma from the old Moulmein Pagoda.
