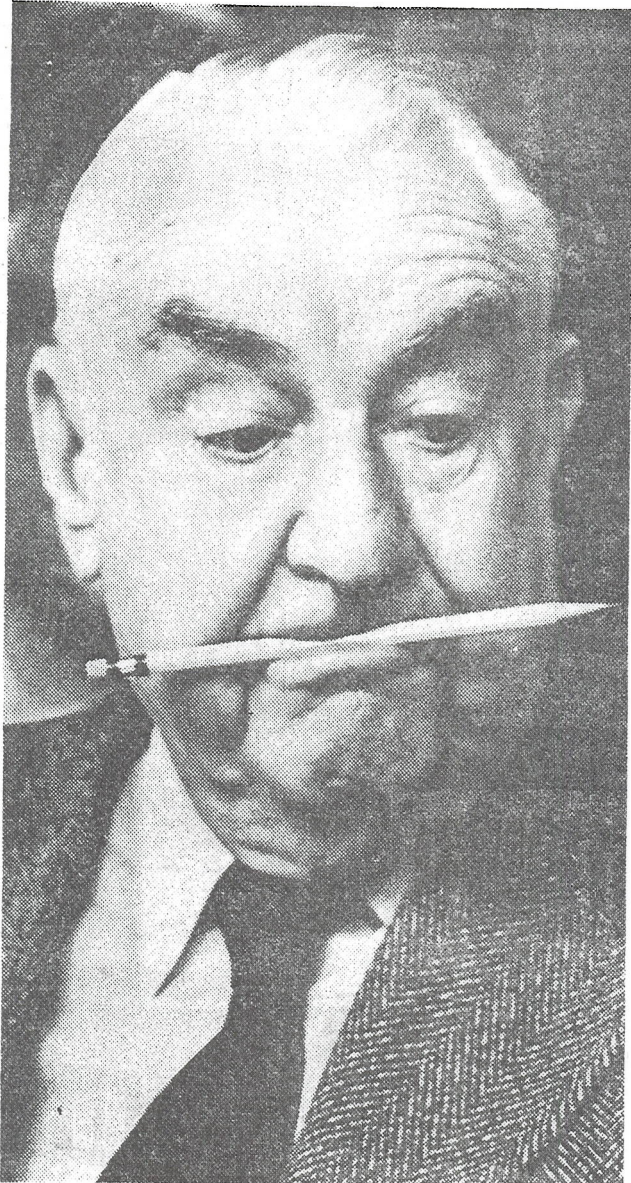


McCord Testimony: TNT in



Photos by Ken Feil—The Washington Post

Sen. Sam J. Ervin (D-N.C.), chairman of the select committee on the Watergate listens to testimony by convicted Watergate conspirator James W. McCord Jr.

By Jules Witcover

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It could have been Joe Friday on "Dragnet" in the Senate Caucus Room, or a precinct sergeant reading a routine report off the police blotter. It could have been, but it wasn't.

It was Watergate conspirator James W. McCord Jr., the one-time FBI agent and CIA security man, and without raising his voice he put the Senate Select Committee's slow-starting hearings into high gear by raising The Big Question:

Did the President of the United States know about—was he involved in—the Watergate cover-up?

With all the aplomb of a Joe Friday, McCord first lulled his audience with a flat, emotionless scene-setting about his recruitment and employment in the Nixon re-election committee's acts of political espionage.

Then, having set up the audience just as Friday always did it, he let them have the punch line, again without special inflection: a charge that higher-ups tried to buy his silence with the connivance of—"the President of the United States."

"Dragnet's" scriptwriter, to build drama, certainly would have done it just that way—the full title, for maximum impact. And that was the way McCord, reading this most sensitive part of his role from a prepared script, intoned the words.

Central Casting could not have come up with a better choice for the part. Puggish, bulldog-faced and determined, this stocky, balding man of 49 who was a leader

in the Watergate break-in understated the high drama all the way, and the result was—devastating.

What he told the committee—how he was directed via a roadside phone booth to a clandestine meeting with a White House go-between freely waving the President's name and a promise of executive clemency under his nose—was just one convicted conspirator's account.

Senators on the panel, both Republican and Democratic—eager to demonstrate their fairness and sensitive of the fact they are not conducting a judicial proceeding—were quick to point that out.

Sen. Edward J. Gurney (R-Fla.), who gives evidence of being the closest thing the President has to a protector on the committee, raised an objection when McCord identified John Caulfield, the alleged go-between, as a White House aide. Caulfield had left the White House, he said.

"You have all kinds of inferences here that are inaccurate and are casting aspersions that are going to damage people's reputations," he complained.

Sen. Howard Baker (R-Tenn.), the committee vice chairman, also weighed in about the pitfalls of secondary sources and hearsay evidence, and Sen. Sam J. Ervin (D-N.C.), the constitutionally correct chairman, joined the chorus.

To this, McCord—ever the dutiful subordinate who only wants to help—said he had tried to note that he was saying what had been

a Plain Brown Wrapper

told to him, and if the committee would rather that he not ... But there was no turning back now. He had the senators, the Caucus Room crowd, and TV-watching America in mid-breath, and he knew it.

The witness, calm and composed in a dark blue suit with a lighter blue stripe, continued to read the narrative:

How he was asked on Jan. 9, 1973, "to go to a pay phone booth near the Blue Fountain Inn on Route 355" near his Rockville home, where he was read a message from Caulfield that said: "Plead guilty. One year is a long time. You will get executive clemency. Your family will be taken care of and when you get out you will be rehabilitated and a job will be found for you. Don't take immunity when called before the grand jury."

• How on Jan. 12, 1973 he "met with Caulfield at the second overlook on George Washington Parkway in Virginia and talked with him in his car. Caulfield advised that he had been attending a law enforcement meeting in San Clemente, California, and had just returned." (Uproarious laughter in the Caucus Room.)

• How Caulfield told him "he was carrying the message of executive clemency to me 'from the very highest levels of the White House,'" and that "the President of the United States" knew of this meeting, would be told of its results, and "I may have a message to you at our next

meeting from the President himself.' "

• How at a later meeting at the same spot Caulfield said that "the President's ability to govern is at stake. Another Teapot Dome scandal is possible, and the government may fall. Everybody is on track but you. You are not following the game plan. [more laughter] Get closer to your attorney. You seem to be pursuing your own course of action. Don't talk if called before the grand jury, keep silent, and do the same if called before a congressional committee.' "

Through all this, McCord droned on as if he were reading off a standard 211—or whatever the number was they used on "Dragnet" for an arrest sheet. If he had an emotional wrench at the time or now, he didn't reveal it. He sat with arms folded, elbows on the brown-felted witness table, hands as steady as his voice.

The first reference to "the President of the United States" seemed to send electricity crackling through the utterly silent Caucus Room. But McCord was oblivious to anything but getting it right, and getting it over. If a good actor ever threw away the lines he raced over, he'd be back in Des Moines.

"Just give me the facts," Friday used to say, and McCord turned it around and unloaded the facts—or what he said were the facts—on the committee. Date. Place. Time. Who was there. What he said. The reply. Again and again. It may yet be that all did not happen pre-

cisely the way James McCord, one-time straight arrow seeking the true path again, said it did—or even close to it. But he sure put it together.

In this town where credibility is all — for a President, for the press, for a congressional witness — this old FBI man, CIA and private cop with a precise and unflinching delivery was hard to knock over, and hardly anybody tried.

Time and again, when a questioner would misspeak what he had said, McCord would carefully correct him, and he refused to engage in hyperbole. If he didn't have a date, he checked and came up with it.

After about three hours of listening to him, Sen. Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii) made a mild stab at challenging McCord. Why was it, he asked, that a man with such an enviable record as a law-enforcement officer would have taken part in an act of political sabotage?

McCord had an answer for that, too: because he was told the Attorney General (John N. Mitchell) and the counsel to the President (John W. Dean III) had approved it, with what McCord surmised was the blessing of the President himself.

But didn't he know it was illegal, and wrong? Inouye asked. Yes, McCord acknowledged, but he is a tactical man, and a technicalities man, not an ideologue or a moralist. If the Attorney General, and the President's counsel, said it was proper, they should know. Mitchell, after all, had the power at the time

to orally order wiretaps for domestic national security reasons, McCord noted.

Well, what about his sudden "change of heart" and disclosure at this late date of the Caulfield offer of executive clemency, allegedly with President Nixon's sanction? McCord told Inouye he hadn't wanted to implicate Caulfield, an old friend, but it was too important now not to tell the story.

At the outset of McCord's four hours of testimony, Senator Baker was having some difficulty hearing the witness. He asked him if he would mind speaking up and a bit farther back from the microphones in front of him.

"I think I'm a little hoarse," he replied evenly. "If you can turn up the volume it might help."

It was done, and throughout the day, McCord proceeded conversationally, without bombast. Yet when he had finished for the day, he had given the scandal-rocked Nixon administration another shaking, single-handedly.

How his story stands up, and whether anyone will come forward to verify it, are key questions that need answering. McCord is to return when the hearings resume Tuesday, and Caulfield's lawyer has been notified that his client is being subpoenaed.

But one thing is certain already. After an uneventful, methodical beginning on Thursday, James McCord, the man in the Watergate who wouldn't keep his mouth shut, has got the Senate committee's televised show on the road.