

'Dirty Tricks' Have Had a Long History

By Marilyn Berger
Washington Post Staff Writer

The techniques of Watergate—burglary, electronic surveillance, laundered money, “plausible denial”—have had a long history in the intelligence craft.

They are the so-called “dirty tricks” that for years have been the province of the Central Intelligence Agency and its foreign counterparts, tricks refined through nearly 30 years of a “cold war.” In the United States, a mysterious group known as the Forty Committee has the last word, or sometimes the next-to-last word, about giv-

ing the green light to any specific operations.

Its role is clearly defined: to consider and approve covert activities in foreign countries in a manner that would be “disavowable” or “deniable” by the United States—or at least by the President of the United States.

Currently its designated members are Henry A. Kissinger, the President's national security adviser who serves as chairman; Deputy Secretary of Defense William P. Clements Jr.; Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs William J. Porter; acting Director of the Central Intelligence Agency William E. Colby, and the chairman of

the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Thomas H. Moorer. The head of the joint chiefs is an addition made during the Nixon administration. The Attorney General was also added while John N. Mitchell held the job.

In the years of its existence under five Presidents, the committee, which has been known by a variety of names, dealt with such activities as the 1954 overthrow of Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz Guzman, the 1953 coup in Iran that overthrew Premier Mossadegh, the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961, the “laundered” funding of friendly political parties in Europe

See **TRICKS**, A9, Col. 1

TRICKS, From A1

and Latin America, the U-2 reconnaissance flights over China and the Soviet Union, and the mounting armies of Meo tribesmen and Thai “volunteers” in Laos.

“The committee was the President's surrogate,” said one official familiar with national security operations. “The whole idea was to allow the President ‘plausible denial’ . . . It protected the President.” The President never signed any papers so there was never any evidence on the record that he either had knowledge of or approved any of the covert operations undertaken, informed sources said.

Witnesses from the various government agencies were often brought before the handful of top officials to explain particular operations. Said one experienced official: “They were like a bunch of schoolboys. They would listen and their eyes would bug out. I always used to say that I could get \$5 million out of the Forty Committee for a covert operation faster than I could get money for a typewriter out of the ordinary bureaucracy.”

Another said that the committee was the most efficient in town. There were no “horse holders,” no “colonels turning charts.” Decisions came quickly, he said.

The core group had from the beginning been four officials who dealt exclusively with foreign affairs and who were just under the top—the national security adviser, the deputy secretary of defense, the under secretary for political affairs in the State Department and

the Director of Central Intelligence. The head of the joint chiefs was specifically excluded, according to one informed source, because political rather than military considerations were the subject of the committee's deliberations.

The Attorney General was specifically excluded because his concerns were supposed to be exclusively domestic. During the Kennedy administration Robert F. Kennedy is said by a number of sources to have sought membership but was refused.

For this reason the Mitchell appointment to this and other highly secret committees, such as the verification panel for arms control, raised serious concerns in the intelligence community about the “mixing up” of domestic and foreign matters.

Invited Confusion

Mitchell, in the view of those familiar with the operation, was there because of his close relationship with the President. As the only Cabinet officer on the committee, he became its ranking member although the national security adviser continued as chairman.

To those who saw the committee in operation, “Mitchell served as the President's eyes and ears.” When Richard Kleindienst succeeded Mitchell at the Justice Department, he did not move into the slot created for the Attorney General on the Forty Committee.

In the words of Thomas L. Hughes, former director of intelligence and research at the State Department, “the Mitchell appointment was an early and symbolic act,

either of carelessness or purposefulness, which inevitably invited confusion and temptation for a partisan past and future campaign manager currently holding the office of Attorney General.”

Hughes said the committee “was originally set up carefully and exclusively as a small and responsible group limited to those people at the highest levels below the President whose official responsibilities were clearly in the foreign affairs area, to consider and propose foreign operations.”

In the view of one source familiar with national security operations, clandestine matters—which were supposed to be examined from the long-range foreign policy point of view and from the national security point of view—imperceptibly became a question of whether they would get this administration into trouble. The question became to be whether immediate domestic implications would be too great.

Variety of Names

Throughout its history, by whatever designation it had, the Forty Committee was to fulfill one overriding function: to assure political control of covert operations. The committee was to consider the wisdom of any proposed activity, its chances of success, whether it would accomplish the purposes desired and whether it was “moral,” “proper” and in the interests of the United States. In the words of one person familiar with its operations: “This was an arm for the furtherance of American foreign relations.”

But the existence of the committee itself was a subject of ‘plausible denial.’ In its first incarnation it was known as the 10/2 or 10/5 Committee, named after the documents creating it. Under President Eisenhower the name changed to the 54/12 Group, again named after the secret order establishing its role — “54” referring to the year of the order. It was also known at that time as the “Special Group.” When someone inadvertently acknowledged the existence of the group, it was renamed the 303 Committee.

Thus if someone asked whether there was such a thing as the 54/12 Committee the answer could be, in truth, no. For by that time it was the 303 Committee, now named for the room in which it met.

The most recent christening — the Forty Committee — is derived from a national security decision memorandum redefining its duties, according to Morton H. Halperin, former member of the National Security Council Staff, and Jeremy J. Stone of the Federation of American Scientists.

During the Kennedy administration, covert operations were also under the control of a parallel secret committee with far more limited responsibilities. This was the counterinsurgency committee.

Sources familiar with national security operations at the time recall that the President's brother, Robert, then Attorney General, was fascinated by the covert operation being run by the

CIA. He fervently wished to get on the 303 Committee, forerunner of the Forty Committee.

This was vetoed, apparently by Gen. Maxwell Taylor, who was brought into the White House after the Bay of Pigs fiasco. As a substitute, Taylor agreed to place Robert Kennedy on the counterinsurgency committee. Once this group started operating, a certain number of cases that might have gone to the Forty Committee (then the 303 Committee) went to the counterinsurgency section.

Weekly Meetings

At least since the Kennedy administration, there has grown an active debate over the propriety of any such covert operations perpetrated by an open society. The arguments in opposition have grown stronger during the current proclaimed era of negotiation and the warming of relations among former Cold War rivals.

In the Truman and early Eisenhower years, when the Forty Committee was known as the 10/2 or 10/5 Committee, meetings were irregular. Then, according to authoritative sources familiar with the operations, President Eisenhower decided that covert operations needed a closer look.

He ordered once-a-week meetings. There was no official chairman but Allen Dulles, then head of the CIA, pretty much controlled the sessions which met in the office of the under secretary of State.

The meetings were said to be rather formal, with an agenda and well prepared staff papers. Few outsiders knew what it was doing, but occasionally witnesses were brought into present specific projects. By most accounts, the committee itself was empowered to consider and approve operations. Only in cases of disagreement was a specific project brought to the President.

But at all times the committee operated under the President's overall policy determination. Authoritative sources say that it was chiefly when Dean Acheson was Secretary of State that specifics were brought to the Oval Office, because of Acheson's frequent reservations.

"In its pristine days," according to one knowledgeable source, "the theory was that things were thrashed out here so that all departments understood each other." Often the committee's report went to the National Security Council with the President attending, said this source. "It was here that one of the Cabinet members might register the dissent of his agency if such dissent existed."

Fewer Meetings

Because of the secrecy surrounding the very existence of the committee, it is difficult to give an accounting of its more recent functions. From recent Senate testimony it is known that the subject of "participation" in the 1970 Chile elections was one concern of the Forty Commit-

tee. That election brought Salvador Allende, a Marxist, to power in Santiago.

Informed sources say, however, that during the Nixon administration there were fewer and fewer formal meetings of the Forty Committee and more and more "telephonic concurrences" — involving quick checks rather than intensive discussions.

One possible reason for the slackening number of meetings could be that the number of covert operations has diminished, but some sources attribute it to a more ad hoc style and a greater than ever dedication to secrecy.

One source said there has not been a formal meeting of the group for more than a year—although it is always possible that some who formerly knew about the committee have been cut out as the White House became more secretive. "There grew up a narrow, incestuous secretive quality among the advisers to the President," said one source. "The old formality used to make this impossible."

Domestic implications became an increasingly important consideration, according to one official who noted that the Forty Committee was only one of a number of similar groups with virtually the same membership. For example, this source noted, the issue of arms to Israel might come to the Defense Programs Review Committee where domestic political implications in the United States might weigh in the considerations.

One official who occasionally had appeared before any White House committees which Mitchell attended spoke of the changed atmosphere during the Nixon administration.

"I never felt comfortable being there when Mitchell was there. I felt his presence caused the members to speak in a very guarded way, not saying what they really thought of foreign political risks for fear they would show themselves not mindful enough of the impact on this administration. He was the administration's presence, not the U.S. government . . .

"There was no real intellectual discussion . . . This was a travesty of serious governmental operations . . . There was inadequate staff work, secretiveness, narrow-based decisions. There was always an intense effort to make the President look good as the main consideration."

By their very nature, covert operations, if successful, become known only after the fact if at all. Sometimes it takes years, sometimes only months—as the domestic covert operations known under the heading of Watergate show.

Thus what, if anything, the Forty Committee or its successor by another name may be considering now is known to only a few men. Of greater interest for the moment is whether there was a domestic equivalent of the Forty Committee dealing with covert operations in this country, and if there was who was on it.