

The Ziegler Rehearsals

The News Business

On Oct. 10, 1972, The Washington Post reported that evidence had been uncovered linking the break-in at the Democratic National Committee's headquarters to an extensive campaign of political sabotage, conducted by officials of the White House and the Committee for the Re-Election of the President. The story named Donald Segretti as one of the agents involved in the sabotage campaign and described dirty tricks perpetrated against various Democratic primary campaigns. Five days later The Post connected Dwight Chapin, then Mr. Nixon's appointments secretary, with Segretti.

Now, courtesy of memos provided by John W. Dean III, we are able to gain some insight into the manner in which members of President Nixon's staff decided in October to respond to those disclosures in the press. We also gain some idea of what they considered to be their obligation to inform the American people.

Chapin's response to the charges in The Washington Post came on Oct. 13 in a terse statement of 80 words. It said that The Post story was based on "hearsay and is fundamentally inaccurate." He denied knowing E. Howard Hunt, admitted having known Segretti "since college days," but "I certainly have never discussed with him any phase of the grand jury proceedings in the Watergate case. Beyond that, I don't propose to have any further comment."

Aware that such a response was bound to be unsatisfactory to the press, officials at the White House set about preparing for the next meeting of the White House press secretary with reporters.

The scene is the Roosevelt Room of the White House on Oct. 15, 1972. Those present were, according to Dean, John Ehrlichman, Ronald Ziegler, Patrick Buchanan, Richard Moore, Chapin, Dean and—by some fluke of history—Chapin's secretary. She took notes, which have become Witness Exhibit 22 accompanying Dean's testimony before the Ervin committee.

As Dean has told the committee, the purpose of the meeting was to prepare Ziegler to answer questions about the Segretti connection. Dean testified that many similar meetings had occurred in the White House, but it would take 200 more pages of testimony to describe them.

In just about 10 pages, we can get the idea of how those sessions were conducted. They were devil's advocate sessions in which Ziegler ran through the standard denial; then others present either supplemented his position or attempted to shoot the kinds of holes in it that they imagined the press would attempt to shoot.

"Now I can tell you," Ziegler says early in his rehearsal, "I have nothing more to say or add on this subject beyond what Dwight Chapin said in his statement. But I can tell you this. At no time has anyone in the White House or this administration condoned such activities as spying on individuals, surveillance of individuals, or sabotaging campaigns in an illegal way." He goes on to note that "the President has said before, and I will repeat again: He does not condone this type of activity."

We see again the studied manner in which the aura of the White House is used as a device to quiet questions. Ziegler again: "I am not going to inject the White House into these stories. I am not going to assume the responsibility from this podium and from the White House press room to answer every unfounded story based on hearsay or unidentified sources . . ."

Ehrlichman offers some augmentation at various points and is especially adroit at wrapping the mantle of the White House around accused staff members. He would have Ziegler say: "Dwight Chapin is terribly offended at the treatment he got over the weekend. I approached him (on) the possibility of coming out here" to the press briefing. "He said he would never again speak to any member of the press and he would like your apologies . . ."

Moore offers language to buttress that stance of reproach of the press for its behavior: "What is the right of anyone to expect an answer from this podium on a story based on sources you will not reveal. Good citizens are being vilified based on irresponsible, unidentified stories and stories which draw broad-sweeping conclusions."

Then they got down to the specifics of how to deal with Segretti's dirty tricks. It is not clear from the fragmentary transcript who is the author of this language:

"As a man who has worked in campaigns for X number of years and have seen many pranks and hoaxes, it occurred to me we should have our own Dick Tuck (as a political prankster) in this campaign. Gordon Strachan recalled that our old friend, Don Segretti, was coming out of the army in September."

It continues in the same casual vein: "We called him and he expressed interest in the assignment of being counter-agent . . . On that basis, I said to him that perhaps I could get an okay for (him) to be supported and take off on (his) own on activities as long as they were legal."

As for the President's personal lawyer supplying the cash: "I referred him to Mr. Kalmbach, who did supply funds which would allow him to act on his own for a few months."

Segretti was to have been treated as a distant relative off on a lark: "The most I heard was a post card or a clipping from a newspaper."

It gets sticky when those at the rehearsal contemplate involving Mr. Nixon, when someone in the room suggests that he issue a statement.

Ehrlichman didn't care too much for that idea: "Chapin is the White House, and the separation—you bridge the separation when you get the President in it."

Dean suggests at several points that one tack to take is to assure the newsmen that "we are looking into (the charges) and we are going to have a response for you." Chapin, according to the transcript, suggests that Ziegler say, "I am not going to dignify desperation politics."

Occasionally the devil's advocates cut through the transcript of the rehearsal with a piercing question: "Ron, that was a self-righteous, self-serving statement. Did Dwight Chapin, the President's appointment's secretary, a man who meets with the President regularly, hire Segretti and instruct him to engage in sabotage?"

Ziegler: "Gentlemen, I have nothing to add to what Mr. Chapin has already said on this and that the story is fundamentally inaccurate and based on hearsay."

Devil's Advocate: "But Ron, why don't you just ask Dwight or why doesn't the President ask him. Did he or did he not hire Segretti?"

Ziegler: "Gentlemen, I have nothing to add to what Chapin has already said on the subject."

The following morning, Ziegler was questioned by the White House press corps. He was asked if the President was concerned about the allegations of Chapin's connections with Segretti. Ziegler responded that the President's concern "goes to the fact that stories are being run that are based on hearsay, innuendo, guilt by association and character assassination."

Surveillance, Ziegler added, was not "condoned by anyone in this administration, and are not directed by anyone in this administration." When pressed, Ziegler said: "Here again, I am not going to dignify with comment from the White House stories that are based on sources which do not reveal themselves and hearsay."

What the episode proves is that only a misleading fragment of the truth known to at least some of the men who participated in the Ziegler rehearsal was shared with the press and, thus, the American public.