

Investigation Unwittingly Delayed

By Jack Anderson

After questioning former Attorney General Richard Kleindienst for four hours in secret, the special prosecutors concluded that the Watergate case might have been cracked months earlier if he had mentioned meeting ringleader G. Gordon Liddy less than 12 hours after the Watergate break-in.

Kleindienst was questioned recently by special prosecutor Archibald Cox' two top aides, James Neal and James Vorenberg, who were satisfied from Kleindienst's answers that he wasn't personally implicated in the scandal. But they couldn't understand his failure, as the nation's top law enforcement officer, to tell his subordinates about the Liddy incident.

Here's what happened on June 17, 1972:

A few hours after the Waterbuggers were arrested at gunpoint inside Democratic Party headquarters, Liddy located Kleindienst at the Burning Tree golf course and rushed off to consult him. Powell Moore, the campaign press chief, asked to go along.

They found Kleindienst sitting with several people at a large table and called him into a back room. Liddy reported urgently that the burglary-bugging squad had been

headed by the President's campaign security chief.

Kleindienst said he was aware of the arrests but was surprised at the involvement of a campaign official. Then Kleindienst picked up a telephone and dialed Assistant Attorney General Henry Petersen. "Henry," instructed Kleindienst, "I want to be sure that these people are treated as any other person would be treated who is arrested under those circumstances."

The prosecutors aren't critical of Kleindienst's handling of Liddy, which was entirely proper. But Kleindienst's failure to mention the incident to his subordinates delayed their investigation.

It took them another 10 days, for example, before they learned the extent of Liddy's involvement. More important, they knew nothing about Moore until the following year.

Unlike Liddy, who is still refusing to talk, Moore testified fully and frankly the first time he appeared before the grand jury. His testimony led to other important pieces of the Watergate puzzle. This could have brought a breakthrough in the case a full year ago.

Following are a few of the revelations that came, at least indirectly, through Moore's testimony.

• Moore realized the morning after the break-in, he testi-

fied, that Liddy had prior knowledge of the crime. Moore reported this to campaign official Robert Mardian, a former assistant attorney general, who had come to the campaign directly from the Justice Department. He is now under investigation for alleged involvement in the Watergate cover-up.

• Moore witnessed the destruction of documents by Liddy, who started with a small shredder and then moved to a larger shredder to speed up the process. Liddy began the shredding operation after a long telephone conversation with his superior, Jeb Stuart Magruder, in California, Moore swore.

• The same morning, according to the testimony, Moore overheard Magruder's assistant, Robert Reisner, getting instructions over the phone from Magruder. When Reisner eventually was called to testify, he told the grand jury that Magruder had asked him to remove sensitive files from the office, including a blue folder. This turned out to be the secret incriminating Watergate file of wiretapped conversations.

• Liddy mentioned to Moore during the morning after the break-in that three people should be notified. They were former Attorney General John Mitchell, campaign official Fred Larue and Magruder. All three, it was learned several

months later, were key figures in the Watergate scandal.

• Moore testified that Mitchell helped to draft the public statement denying that the campaign committee had anything to do with the Waterbuggers or their crimes. The statement was laced with noble terms about this type of activity having no place in the American political system.

All these events happened within a few hours after the Watergate break-in. If the prosecutors had known about Moore and had been able to take his testimony last summer, the Watergate case almost certainly would have broken wide open long before the election.

Yet Kleindienst, though free of any Watergate taint himself, failed to tell his own prosecutors about his curious meeting with Liddy and Moore on June 17, 1972.

Footnote: Kleindienst explained to us that he didn't regard the Liddy-Moore visit as significant at the time. He later learned that Moore asked to come along so he would be a witness in case Liddy tried to compromise the Attorney General, Kleindienst told us.