

Watergate: The Miami Beach Question Mark

Who was really responsible for the Watergate cover-up at the White House may depend on the answer to a question not considered during the Senate Watergate committee's hours of testimony: did John D. Ehrlichman keep Nixon campaign manager Clark MacGregor from the truth about Watergate last summer?

The undisputed facts, not revealed until now, are these. While publicly exuding confidence about no White House involvement in the scandal, MacGregor became privately anxious during the Republican national convention in Miami Beach last August. Consequently, he asked for a full briefing from John W. Dean III, then the White House counsel. After some delay, Dean informed MacGregor he knew nothing. Since Dean was well aware of the cover-up, the truth was being hidden from MacGregor.

Dean has privately informed federal prosecutors and Senate investigators that his silence was ordered by Ehrlichman, then domestic chief at the White House. If true, the Watergate cover-up would be traced to the President's senior staff. If not true, the White House contention that middle-level staffer Dean directed the cover-up would be sustained.

Like much in Watergate, the truth about who kept the facts from MacGregor may never be known. But this question is closely related to the overriding issue of President Nixon's own innocence or complicity. Contrary to the wishes of his present senior aides, Mr. Nixon's role in Watergate has been intertwined with the conduct of his two former deputies, Ehrlichman and H. R. Haldeman.

There is no corroboration for Dean's report that Ehrlichman gagged him in Miami Beach. But other details of Dean's story to investigators—including how MacGregor sought him out—are fully confirmed by other sources.

Moreover, the picture of a frantic Clark MacGregor at Miami Beach seeking out the lowdown on Watergate—a picture confirmed by several sources—contradicts what Ehrlichman has been saying under oath. In his uncorroborated testimony, Ehrlichman has depicted MacGregor resisting suggestions that he probe the Watergate scandal. Thus, up to the unverifiable point of whether Ehrlichman blocked the briefing, the facts favor Dean's rather than Ehrlichman's version of reality.

MacGregor, transferred from the White House to replace John Mitchell as director of the Committee for the Re-Election of the President (CREEP) following the Watergate break-in, now emerges as an anguished man at Miami Beach.

He was disturbed by a Time magazine report on Watergate on the eve of the convention. Following his assurances on "Meet the Press" the day before the convention, some influential Republican figures met with MacGregor and cautioned him to be certain of his facts. State CREEP leaders meeting with him in Miami Beach gave the same warning.

Sometime that week, MacGregor also had a strange conversation with Robert Mardian, one of his lieutenants at CREEP who feared the White House was out to get him. As MacGregor remembers it, Mardian told him

in conspiratorial terms not to assume too much about Watergate. "Just remember what I said," warned Mardian, without elaborating.

Concerned much more by the advice from nationally prominent Republicans and state leaders than Mardian's hints, MacGregor grilled his deputy, Jeb Magruder, for hours in Miami Beach. Though knee-deep in the cover-up, Magruder denied everything. A frustrated MacGregor next requested a full briefing from Dean, designated as the White House official to investigate Watergate.

Dean could not be immediately located, and MacGregor was told that Dean—then a bachelor—was out on the town in Miami Beach. According to what Dean later told investigators, however, he was checking with his boss, Ehrlichman, whether to brief MacGregor. The answer, according to Dean, was a flat no.

MacGregor cannot remember seeing Dean in Miami Beach. Other sources in a position to know, however, say they did meet in MacGregor's Doral hotel room early during convention week. According to an eyewitness, Dean informed MacGregor he could add nothing new on Watergate.

In interviews with federal and Senate investigators, Dean has said Ehrlichman later barred him from fully briefing press secretary Ron Ziegler and Leonard Garment, Dean's successor as White House counsel. But his accusation, thus far unexplored, that Ehrlichman kept him from telling the truth to the President's campaign manager a year ago goes to the very heart of responsibility for the cover-up.