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New York Times' Account

What White House Feared About Ellsberg

New York

It wasn't the leak of the Pentagon Papers that caused the White House to set up the "Plumbers group," but fear that Daniel Ellsberg might tell Russia which of its cities the United States would attack in case of war, The New York Times said yesterday.

Times reporter Seymour Hersh also said the White House sought to limit investigations of the plumbers' break-in at the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist because of fears such investigations would compromise a Soviet secret police agent who was actually an FBI informer.

But Hersh also said there was serious disagreement among administration officials over whether any of this information was true or — in any case — whether it justified setting up the plumbers.

Some White House officials questioned whether President Nixon was more interested in shielding possible criminal activities by his aides than in protecting the national security, Hersh said.

The President has never made public any details of what he called the national security reasons for setting up the plumbers unit.

Hersh's story quoted past and present officials in the White House, the CIA and other government agencies — although not by name.

Early in the 1960s, said the Times, Ellsberg, a former Rand Corp. and Defense Department employee, was active in helping then Defense secretary Robert McNamara revise contingency plans for attacking the Soviet Union in case of nuclear war. These were contained in a super-secret document known as the Single Integrated Operation Plans.

And while the information has been updated and altered over the next decade, some administration sources were said to feel that Ellsberg's knowledge could still be very damaging to the U.S if made available to the Soviets.

And it was the Soviet secret police counteragent, according to some administration sources, who told the FBI that Ellsberg had delivered the Pentagon Papers to the Soviet embassy in Washington after their publication by newspapers had been held up by a court order.

Hersh quoted sources as saying that the agent's statements were never questioned because he was regarded as "one of the important informers in the national security establishment..."

Other administration members, however, said the agent was really an agent provocateur.

"We've been deceived for years by this fellow," Hersh quoted one intelligence official with 30 years experience. "He's been a double agent for nearly ten years."

"In recent interviews," said the Times, "government investigators said they had yet to establish any evidence indicating that Dr. Ellsberg gave the Pentagon Papers to the Soviet embassy... or indeed that the Russians got the papers from any source."

Hersh also reported that—contrary to all of Henry Kissinger's statement that he knew nothing about the plumbers—the now Secretary of State actually played a key role in urging the President to establish the unit.

A State Department spokesman told the Times that Kissinger stood on his previous denials.

Hersh said one source "closely associated with the White House" explained the creation of the plumbers unit this way:

"You've got to understand," he said, "that you're dealing with people who are terribly paranoid on the subject of leaks. And since one of the greatest leak artists is Kissinger himself, it's easy to see why he would get more upset than anyone else."

In a subsequent article on the plumbers, Hersh says President Nixon played a far more active role in the secret operations of the group than either he or witnesses before the Senate Watergate committee have reported.

Hersh's account said interviews disclosed that the President developed a close working relationship with the leaders of the plumbers through a series of meetings in the White House during the summer of 1971.

But Hersh said the interviews produced no information conflicting with the President's statement that he had not known of plans for the plumbers to break into the Los Angeles office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist.

United Press