

# It Takes Two to Tell The Tale

One of the principles that has characterized The Washington-Post investigative reporting on Watergate from its inception has been a rule that nothing told a reporter by one source is to be published until it can be confirmed by yet another independent source. "If one person will tell you," said an investigative reporter, "then it's not very hard to get it from another. There are no secrets in Washington."

As a result of that principle, very little of what The Post has printed about Watergate has ever been successfully refuted by the Nixon administration. At the same time, stories that later turned out to be true were withheld from publication because that second source couldn't be found.

## The News Business

But the best of principles often go awry, and this is the anatomy of one such story, pieced together as best it can be without violating those all-important confidences.

From the outset of the Watergate hearings, a familiar refrain among the embarrassed Republicans on Capitol Hill was that they would eventually prove that the Democrats were as guilty of "dirty tricks" as the Republicans.

During John Dean's painful week, several Republicans warned their Democratic colleagues to contain any temptation to smirk, for their embarrassing time was soon to come. When it didn't materialize by the August recess, notice was served that time would be set aside immediately after the recess for "Democratic dirty tricks." Nothing comparable to the Watergate break-in materialized.

Then, as if out of the blue, a four-column story marched across the front-page of The Washington Post of Dec. 20, its headline declaring: **Hunt Tells Senate Panel He Spied On Goldwater in '64 on LBJ Order.**

The story told of E. Howard Hunt, working with other operatives of the Central Intelligence Agency, spying on Goldwater "well before his nomination." It said he acted at the instruction of President Johnson, passed to Hunt through an intermediary.

The story went on to quote Goldwater himself as saying, "I knew 10 years ago what was going on" and he added that friends of his within the CIA and FBI had told him he was under the surveillance of both agencies during his disastrous campaign.

There at last, it seemed, was the stuff of which bipartisan scandal is made. That Hunt, the principal actor responsible for so much of Watergate, was also involved made it all the more compelling a tale.

Unfortunately, the bubble was burst 24 hours later. The headline then was: **Hunt's Role in 1964 Minor, Hill Unit Told.**

The second day story acknowledged: "Watergate conspirator E. Howard Hunt's alleged 'surveillance' of Sen. Barry Goldwater during the 1964 presidential campaign consisted of having a secretary pick up press releases, speeches, travel schedules and other materials at Republican headquarters, according to reliable accounts of Hunt's secret testimony to the Senate Select Watergate Committee."

So, those who were expecting the long-awaited unfolding of the Democratic version of "dirty tricks" were to be disappointed once again.

Some editors have defended the first Post story against the charge that it was based on a single source by saying that the unnamed source was one, and Goldwater was the second. Therefore, it has been argued, the story didn't violate the paper's wise principle of requiring two independent sources.

The trouble is that Goldwater apparently was not an independent source, but received his information from the same person The Post quoted. Apparently, Goldwater learned of the Hunt disclosures from a source within the committee and tipped an editor of The Post. The editor passed the tip to a reporter who wound up facing Goldwater's source. The reporter then went to Goldwater for more elaboration.

Thus, The Post was in the posture of reporting two sources for the story, when in fact it had only one, a violation of its own rule, a rule that had served it well for more than a year.

An explanation has been offered by Post editors and reporters, and it is that there was no way to tell for certain that Goldwater's source was also The Post's single source.

The business of printing stories based on anonymous sources is a dicey one under the best of circumstances. In Watergate, it is an incredibly tricky game. Those who know it best develop a smell for a bad pitch.

In this story, waiting a day to check further and to learn — as it later became possible to do — the content of the transcript would have prevented The Post from having to back away from the story in 24 hours.

None of this is to suggest for a moment that sordid campaign practices among Democrats are not yet to be revealed. Whether they come anywhere close to surgical gloves on the hands of former CIA agents in a Republican headquarters remains to be seen.