

National Security: A Nixon Rationale

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Jan. 16—

Nearly all the "national security" questions involved in the Watergate case have now been made public, and in the wake of their disclosure critics are still raising questions about President Nixon's intentions when he invoked national security last April to halt a Justice Department inquiry into the White House investigative unit called the "plumbers."

At that time, Mr. Nixon insisted that no details of the September, 1971, break-in at the office of Dr. Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist be forwarded to the Los Angeles court where Dr. Ellsberg was on trial for his role in the Pentagon papers case.

The break-in was directed by E. Howard Hunt Jr. and G. Gordon Liddy of the plumbers team, who were later convicted for their involvement in the burglary and bugging of the Watergate offices of the Democratic National Committee in June, 1972.

While the President was subsequently persuaded to change his mind about sending the Ellsberg material to Los Angeles, he did not change his mind, as his public statements showed, about the importance of national security in relation to the plumbers.

The plumbers were a four-man investigating unit, jointly headed by Egil Krogh Jr. and David R. Young Jr., the existence of which was known to only a handful inside the White House and elsewhere. Mr. Nixon has depicted the secrecy about the unit as a function of "national security," but other Government officials believe the secrecy was meant to hide the group's existence from the normal police agencies inside the Federal bureaucracy.

Three Major Issues

A similar ambiguity marks the known "national security" issues involved in the plumbers' operation.

Last month, The New York Times reported on three major security issues behind the President's concern.

One was a fear that Dr. Ellsberg—who said he provided the Pentagon papers to the press—may have been an informer capable of turning over nuclear targeting secrets and code-breaking information to the Soviet Union. But no evidence was gathered to link Dr. Ellsberg to the Russians—a fact most certainly known to the White House by April, 1973. (The Pentagon papers

were first published in The New York Times in June, 1971).

A second cause for concern was the belief that an agent of the K.G.B., the Soviet intelligence agency, would be compromised by continued Justice Department inquiry into the plumbers. The agent, who had

been a counterspy for the United States since the mid-nineteen-sixties, had informed the Federal Bureau of Investigation that a set of the Pentagon papers had been delivered to the Soviet Embassy in Washington in late June, 1971.

Fear About India

But the agent has long been a source of controversy inside the Government. Many reliable intelligence officials have said that the K.G.B. man was an agent provocateur, rather than an authentic informer.

The third concern revolved around possible jeopardy to a Central Intelligence Agency informer inside the Indian Government. But there was no outcry in India when existence of the agent was made known last month. And one well-informed intelligence official, asked then about the Indian agent, said, "The issue involved here isn't national security; it's Nixon security."

What White House and other sources consider to be the President's final major "national security" concern—the in-house snooping by the military on the White House itself—has been widely publicized in recent days. Once again, there have been contradictions over the significance of the alleged spying, which was investigated by Mr. Young—at President Nixon's specific direction—in late 1971.

When newspaper accounts of the Young investigation were initially printed last week, White House officials privately depicted it as an extremely serious "security matter. One aide said the President chose not to disclose the situation in order to protect the "whole military command structure."

Beginning yesterday, however, high White House officials took a different tack, depicting the incident as the work of an "eager-beaver" Navy enlisted man. He was said to have funneled material in 1971 from the office of Henry A. Kissinger, then Mr. Nixon's national security adviser, to the office of Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

A Powerful Appeal

Today a Pentagon spokesman, William Beecher, said that some defense officials believed the alleged spying was merely the result of "overexuberance and some impropriety" on the part of some military men assigned

to liaison duty with Mr. Kissinger's staff.

Yet, President Nixon, in a speech last November, had described the incident as being "so sensitive" that the chairman of the Senate Watergate committee, Sam J. Ervin Jr., Democrat of North Carolina, and the vice chairman, Howard H. Baker Jr., Republican of Tennessee, "have decided that they should not delve further" into it.

The power of a "national security" appeal—especially when invoked by the President—can be measured by the Senate's subsequent decision, based only on the facts as presented by the White House, not to investigate the spying allegations.

If the matter were as important as the White House indicated, the committee might have asked why no one was punished for it. If no one was punished, was genuine national security involved?

A Deleted Paragraph

The Senate committee also agreed with a White House request to delete a paragraph—for "national security" reasons—from a plumbers document released to the press last August. The paragraph dealt only with a request to British intelligence to determine whether Dr. Ellsberg had been approached by Soviet espionage agents while a student in England in the early nineteen-fifties. There was much published and private speculation, never confirmed, that the paragraph concerned matters far more significant.

Many knowledgeable officials, including some who have been involved in Watergate matters for more than a year, are now convinced that the "national security" issue was raised by the White House as a means of forestalling a detailed scrutiny of the Ellsberg break-in, as well as of the White House plans for gaining political advantage out of the Ellsberg trial. If so, they say, this could amount to obstruction of justice, a charge that is also being mentioned in connection with the apparent alteration of Watergate tape recordings.

JANUARY 17, 1974

for Secrecy That No Longer Persuades