

WXPost

MAR 30 1974



By Oliphant for the Denver Post

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

Sen. Baker and the CIA

Sen. Howard Baker's fruitless investigation of gossamer links between the Watergate scandal and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) seems unlikely to help President Nixon but threatens serious damage to the nation's beleaguered foreign intelligence operation.

Despite accumulating newspaper leaks and Baker's hints of knowing much more than he can tell, Watergate is not about to be blamed on the CIA, in part or in whole. Under close examination, the leaks turn out to be red herrings. Objective investigators are positive there was no CIA role in Watergate.

But conservative Republican Baker, ironically, sounds ever more like left-leaning critics of the CIA who complain that senators linked too closely to the agency never do adequately probe its inner recesses. What's more, the flood of innuendo seemingly originating from Baker's investigation further erodes the CIA's tattered morale and prestige.

Baker's motives are as shrouded as his overall Watergate performance. As senior Republican on the Senate Watergate Committee during last summer's televised hearings, he achieved instant fame. But the image of objectivity that made him a TV idol infuriated the White House and party regulars. Baker, a party man and a Nixon man, began hedging his bets in mid-summer.

That was apparent Aug. 2 when Richard Helms, former CIA director, returned from his post as ambassador to Iran to testify before the Watergate committee. Many senators believed the highly respected Helms had been bounced from the CIA for refusing to take the Watergate rap. But Baker was surprisingly hostile, his questions pre-empting his future investigation.

Baker has heatedly denied that this course was dictated by senior White House aides. Even so, his actions were obviously designed to help Mr. Nixon. In explaining his conduct immediately after the Watergate burglary, the Pres-

ident contended he feared investigation would uncover super-secret CIA operations. If Baker developed even tangential CIA connections with Watergate, Mr. Nixon would obviously look better.

Working toward that end, Baker late last October noted a Harper's magazine article by Andrew St. George claiming that Helms had advance knowledge of the Watergate burglary. Baker eagerly dispatched the article to

"Under close examination the leaks turn out to be red herrings. Objective investigators are positive there was no CIA role in Watergate."

Sen. Stuart Symington of Missouri, acting chairman of the CIA oversight subcommittee. St. George, a journalistic swashbuckler, was summoned to Washington for a closed-door session. The verdict: he knew nothing.

But Baker relied on more than flamboyant journalism. The Watergate committee's minority staff, concentrating on the CIA, has produced a classified report. Insinuating more than accusing, it is the mother lode for published reports suggesting some ominous CIA role in Watergate (though, publicly, Baker affirms Helms' innocence).

The Watergate committee majority staff regards the report as next to useless. Rep. Lucien Nedzi of Michigan, ranking CIA expert in Congress, believes there is no reason to change the Oct. 23 finding of his House subcommittee giving the CIA a clean bill of health. Federal prosecutors have found no CIA role in the conspiracy. Pub-

lished charges of such a role have all turned into red herrings.

Thus, recent newspaper accounts of internal tapes destroyed by Helms in his last CIA days become hollow when it is learned they were unrelated to Watergate. Nor is there factual grounding for insinuations, fostered by Baker, that prize-winning Washington Post reporter Bob Woodward was given Watergate information in return for steering clear of the CIA. The most recent red herring: a Chicago Tribune story, reflecting the Baker report, that a CIA agent was sent to Watergate burglar James McCord's house shortly after the burglary to destroy documents linking him with the CIA; in truth, a CIA informant joined McCord's wife in burning his papers.

Baker has been subjected to puzzled scrutiny by Senate colleagues, not only for his insinuations but for the way he conducts his investigation. When Helms was summoned from Teheran yet again last month, he faced intensely hostile closed-door questioning by Baker. The use of ex-White House aide Charles Colson, indicted in the Watergate conspiracy, as a major source of information in Baker's CIA investigation, is subject to criticism.

Moreover, the investigation is beginning to echo old complaints from Senate super-doves such as Sen. J. W. Fulbright of Arkansas: The CIA is permitted to run wild by Symington and other Senate protectors. Adding conservative Baker to the Fulbright camp further endangers the future of this vital agency.

When Baker on CBS's "Face the Nation" last Sunday declared "there's a great wealth of information" coming from his investigation (though he could not say what), his real message to the House could be: don't push too hard on impeachment because I am raising lethal new questions about the CIA. Actually, Mr. Nixon's problems seem too acute for Baker's warning to matter much. However he may hurt the CIA, Howard Baker can scarcely help the President.