

He's Out of Prison

Segretti's Unsettled Life After Watergate

By John M. Crewdson
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The tall, tanned lawyer stopped in mid-stride, peered through the dim light of Perino's restaurant bar at a tiny group huddled over a corner table, and slowly walked over to extend his hand to the smaller man.

"Uh, glad it's over for you," said Herbert W. Kalmbach to Donald K. Segretti. "I, um, just wanted to stop and wish you the best. Awfully tough for you."

Then the Newport Beach lawyer, who two years ago this month was plying Segretti with secret Republican campaign funds to finance the White House political sabotage ring he directed, flashed a sheepish

grin, withdrew his hand and quickly moved on.

That's the way it has been going for Segretti, who last month became the first convicted Watergate figure to put the affair behind him when he was released from federal prison at Lompoc (Santa Barbara county). A few embarrassed encounters with former aides to President Nixon, averted glances from longtime friends and no offers of work.

On March 25, after serving four months and three weeks of a six-month sentence, Segretti ended an ordeal of imprisonment that still awaits the handful of others, including Kalmbach, who have pleaded guilty to Watergate-related charges.

After a stopover at a government "safehouse" near Washington, where he testi-

fied for the prosecution at the trial of Dwight L. Chapin, his college classmate and political mentor, Segretti finally returned home this month. (Chapin was convicted of having lied to the FBI.)

It was October 10, 1972, when Segretti was first reported to be one of 50 "undercover Nixon operatives" employed by the White House and the Committee for the Re-Election of the President to spy on and disrupt the primary campaigns of the major Democratic presidential candidates.

The "Segretti operation" — his name means "secrets" in Italian — eventually proved to be far less ambitious or consequential than portrayed in early news accounts.

For Segretti, however, it was exciting — the cross-country airplane trips, the clandestine meetings in bars and motels with agents who knew him as "Don Simmons," the Mercedes-Benz that he financed with part of the \$45,000 he received from Kalmbach.

He had not bargained, however, for the visits from stern-faced FBI agents or the waves of newsmen who besieged his expensive bachelor apartment in the affluent singles enclave of Marina del Rey.

All the young lawyer had wanted was the "fun" promised by Chapin, whom he had known at the University of Southern California ten years before, and the government job his friend had hinted would be waiting in Washington after the election.



HERBERT KALMBACH
Embarrassed



DWIGHT CHAPIN
Prosecuted



Donald Segretti, the first Watergate figure to have his prison sentence behind him

Although he is troubled now by some of the Watergate disclosures, Segretti explained that when he first went to work for Chapin and Gordon Strachan at the reelection committee, "I really believed in Richard Nixon. I believed in the election of Richard Nixon."

Much of his Army service was devoted to defending conscientious objectors, both here and in Vietnam. Ending the war and the draft — issues on which Nixon based his reelection effort — were "very important" to the young officer.

Segretti says he is convinced that most of what he did in the service of the President was politically harmless, and that none of it altered the outcome of the Democratic primary elections or aided the selection of Senator George McGovern as the party's presidential nominee over Senators Edmund S. Muskie or Hubert H. Humphrey.

Some of his "pranks," he thinks, were even humorous.

He still chuckles over the memory of the confusion created by the arrival of unordered food, unemployed entertainers and uninvited guests at a Washington fund-raising banquet for Muskie in 1972.

Segretti expresses regret, however, over the incident that served as a basis for the misdemeanor charges to which he pleaded guilty — the mailing, during the 1972 Florida primary, of a letter on stolen Muskie stationery that falsely accused Senators Humphrey and Henry M. Jackson of sexual misconduct.

But even that seemed something of a prank at the time. "I don't think I took it as seriously then as I do now," he says.

Although Segretti characterizes himself as an "apolitical" person, concerned with issues rather than parties, he admits to "a citizen's feeling of outrage" over Watergate, of which he does not really feel himself a part.

"What really bothers me," Segretti says, shaking his head, "is why is 18½ minutes of that tape just not there?"

Should Nixon, whom he once believed he was helping to reelect, now resign? "I think it would be wrong for him to resign."

Should he be impeached? "Maybe."

For himself, Chapin and

his other former colleagues, "What's happened is past," Segretti said. "I don't think any of us feel any animosity for each other."

Someone else is living in his old bachelor apartment in Marina del Rey now. Segretti is staying with his widower father, a hotel limousine driver, in nearby Culver City, while he tries to find a job.

He still drives the white Mercedes, but it is no longer running well and needs mechanical work that he cannot afford. He has seen only one of his pre-Watergate friends, a woman, since his release.

Before entering prison, Segretti was reluctant to visit public places for fear that his face or name would be recognized. He is still wary but is working hard to overcome his fear because of the necessity of looking for work.

But every so often there is an incident that makes him cringe a bit.

Segretti telephoned the USC Alumni Placement Center the other day, for example, to add his name to a list of applicants awaiting referrals of job offers. The secretary who answered the call routinely asked for his name, which he spelled for her.

"There was this stunned silence," Segretti said.

*'Pranks' were
lucrative
and fun
--but now he
can't find
a job*