

'Government Cannot Survive'

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By the testimony of those present when it all began, the famous "plumbers" unit was born in a White House mood of fear and massive distrust.

It was summer, 1971, and the Pentagon Papers had just been leaked to The New York Times by Daniel Ellsberg.

Attorney General John N. Mitchell believed Ellsberg was part of a Communist conspiracy, White House aide John D. Ehrlichman recalled later. National Security adviser Henry A. Kissinger was "quite agitated."

"We were told he (Ellsberg) was a fanatic, known to be a drug abuser, and in knowledge of very critical defense secrets of current validity, such as nuclear deterrent targeting," Ehrlichman said.

President Nixon was particularly outraged and demanded that such leaks be investigated and stopped at

any cost. One of his closest aides, Charles W. Colson, remembered much later how Mr. Nixon pressed the point: "I don't give a damn how it is done, do whatever has to be done to stop these leaks and prevent further unauthorized disclosures," Colson quoted the President as saying. "I don't want to be told why it can't be done. This government cannot survive, it cannot function if anyone can run out and leak whatever documents he wants to . . . I don't want excuses, I want results. I want it done, whatever the cost."

These and other glimpses of the Ellsberg anguish are pieced together in the books of evidence released by the House Judiciary Committee. Together, they provide the explanation of top Administration officials of why the plumbers unit was secretly formed.

A principal reason was the White House assumption that J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI were not pushing the Ellsberg investigation

hard enough. It was not being given top priority at the agency, one aide reported. Hoover even had disciplined an agent who had interviewed Ellsberg's father-in-law, Ehrlichman reported.

The plumbers—officially called the "Special Investigation Unit"—was specifically authorized by President Nixon to investigate Ellsberg; the unit's operations were given top priority in the White House.

Ehrlichman was to be in over-all charge. One of his aides, Egil (Bud) Krogh, and a member of Kissinger's National Security Council staff, David Young, were to be co-directors.

To conduct the investigation, Krogh turned to a lawyer and former FBI agent, G. Gordon Liddy, then a Treasury Department attorney specializing in narcotics investigation. At Colson's suggestion, E. Howard Hunt, a former Central Intelligence Agency employe, was hired to assist Liddy.

They set up shop in Room

16, a warren of offices and a conference room on the first floor of the Executive Office Building. They were equipped with a special alarm system, three-way combination safes, and a kind of war room apparatus consisting of a bulletin board listing their projects. Because the chief objective was plugging information leaks, the Special Investigation Unit quickly became known internally as the "plumbers."

Their most celebrated escapade—breaking into the Los Angeles office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist—stemmed at least indirectly from the President's instruction to get a fix on Ellsberg at any cost.

Krogh had suggested sending the plumbers to California to investigate Ellsberg. Ehrlichman passed this on to Mr. Nixon and, according to Ehrlichman's recollection, the President agreed.

"He (Mr. Nixon) responded that Krogh should, of course, do whatever he

and Thus the Plumbers

considered necessary to get to the bottom of the matter—to learn what Ellsberg's motives and potential further harmful action might be," Ehrlichman recalled in an affidavit made early this year.

"I told Krogh, in substance, that he should do whatever he considered necessary." When Krogh proposed a "covert attempt" to learn what Ellsberg had told his analyst, Ehrlichman regarded this as fitting within the President's mandate and promptly agreed. He said he wasn't aware of a plan to break into the psychiatrist's office.

Hunt, helped by an entrée from Ehrlichman, had easy access to CIA assistance for the break-in and other clandestine activities. CIA technical aides outfitted him with a wig, a speech-altering device, and a special camera fitted into a tobacco pouch.

There is Hunt's testimony, given last year, which shows he was assigned by Colson to falsify information in or-

der to prove that the Kennedy Administration had conspired in the assassination in 1963 of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem.

Hunt was told to fabricate State Department cables that would lend support to that theory. Hunt told the Senate Watergate Committee:

"I believe it was desired by Mr. Colson, or at least some of his colleagues, to demonstrate that a Catholic U.S. administration had in fact conspired in the assassination of a Catholic chief of state of another country."

After Hunt fabricated cables, inserting them in gaps of a chronological series of messages between Washington and Saigon in 1963, Colson tried to interest Life Magazine reporter William Lambert in the story. Lambert never wrote the story.

A series of memos and affidavits make it clear that the White House had a double motive in the Ellsberg

case. First, it wanted to track down his leaks and motives. Second, it wanted to paint him as a villainous traitor in a media campaign that would also embarrass those in political life who condoned the leaking of the Pentagon Papers.

Colson wrote in a memorandum on June, 25, 1971:

Colson also suggested, in a memo to White House chief of staff H. R. Halde- man, that the Pentagon Papers themselves might be used as a wedge to divide Democrats whose loyalties lay either with the Kennedys or Lyndon B. Johnson.

"We could of course plant and try to prove the thesis that Bobby Kennedy was behind the preparation of these papers because he planned to use them to overthrow Lyndon Johnson (I suspect that there may be more truth than fantasy to this)."

Colson also made several attempts to interest various congressional committees in

holding public hearings on the Pentagon Papers case and was prepared to furnish committee staffs with information that the plumbers turned up in the Ellsberg investigation.

He wanted Rep. Richard H. Ichord (D-Mo.) to open hearings with the House Internal Security Committee, but word came back that Ichord was preparing to run for governor of Missouri and feared such an investigation might alienate liberal support.

By the fall of 1971, the plumbers were nominally dissolved, only to surface again as the Watergate burglars in June, 1972. Liddy by that time had been assigned to the Committee for the Reelection of the President.

He and Hunt planned the Watergate break-in and carried it out. In their crew were two of the Cuban Americans who had participated with them in the break-in of Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office.