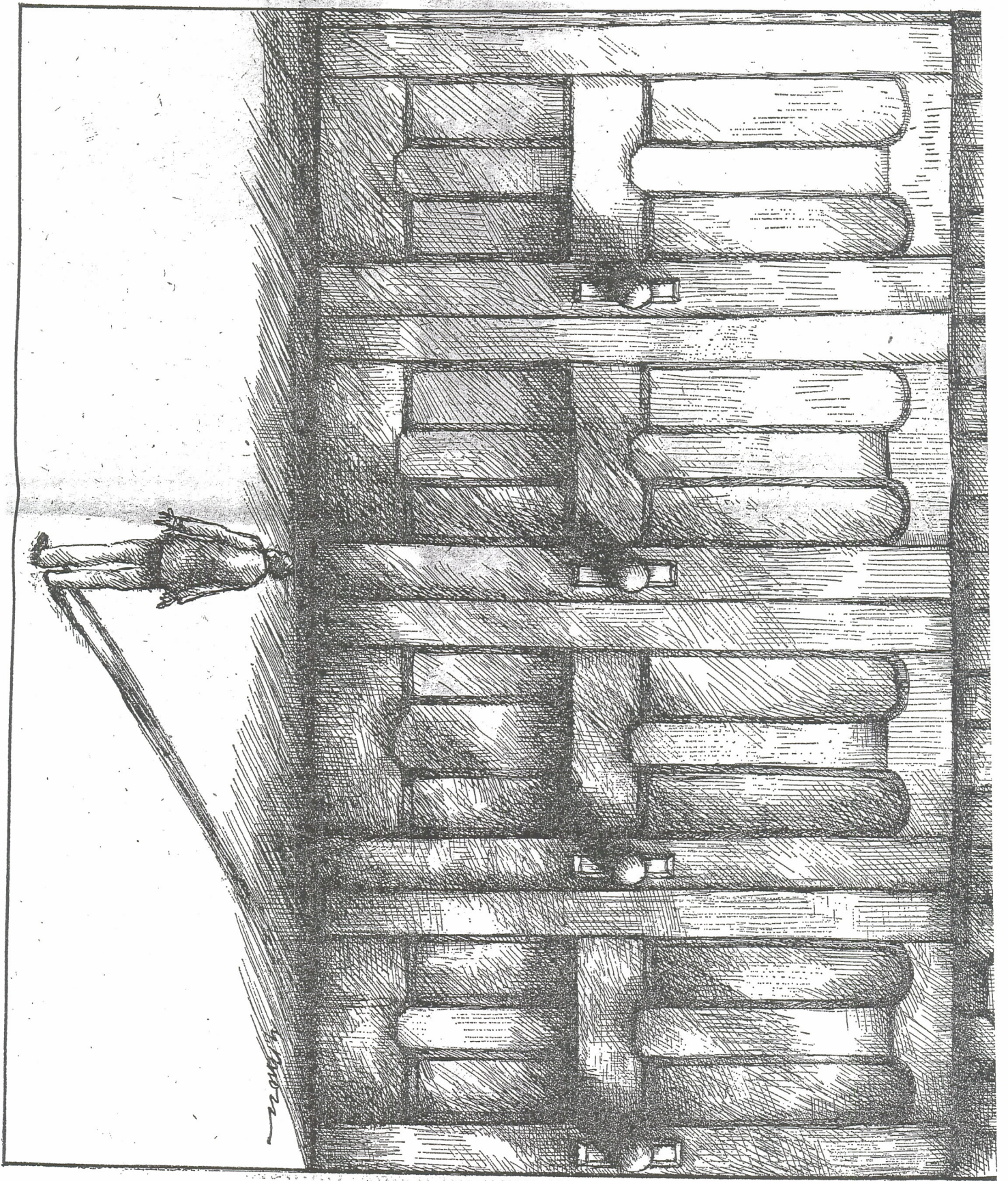


“But at Key Biscayne, where the President was resting, and in California and Washington, where his men were meeting, the meaning of Watergate was all too clear.”

A Passion for the Covert: The Response to the Threat of Discovery



By Carl Bernstein
and Bob Woodward

VICE PRESIDENT Richard M. Nixon had been defeated in the closest presidential election in American history. "I have never seen a man take such defeat with such grace," Herbert G. Klein, his press secretary told reporters the morning after. "Even in defeat, Mr. Nixon goes down in history as one of the truly great champions of our country."

A few hours later, clearly under strain, the Vice President arrived in the ballroom of Washington's Mayflower Hotel to thank several hundred campaign workers. In the front lines of those who had helped bring him so painfully close to becoming the nation's 35th President were an obscure advertising executive from Los Angeles and an equally unknown attorney from Seattle. Their names: H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman.

In Kansas City, the returns of the 1960 election had been followed closely by a 26-year-old paper pulp salesman who temporarily quit his job that fall to serve as a ward chairman for Richard Nixon's campaign. His father, an ardent Civil War buff, had named him for the famous Confederate cavalry raider. He was: Jeb Stuart Magruder.

In Washington, the administrative assistant to Sen. Leverett Saltonstall of Massachusetts had seen his party's national prospects grow dim as the hopes of election eve turned to the morning's hard reality. His name: Charles W. Colson.

In New York, a senior partner in a law firm specializing in the sale of municipal bonds viewed the presidential campaign as far removed from his secure existence on Wall Street. His name: John N. Mitchell.

In California, another lawyer was in the process of building a lucrative real estate title practice in the seaside Los Angeles suburb of Newport Beach. His name: Herbert W. Kalmbach.

Others then unknown to the public were scattered around the country in various stages of their careers. At the headquarters of the Rand Corp. in California, Daniel Ellsberg was pioneering the application of game theories to war.

At the University of Southern California, Donald Segretti was helping manage the campaign of his classmate, Dwight Chapin, for the presidency of Sigma Chi. At a law office in Connecticut, L. Patrick Gray III, a retired submarine skipper, was beginning a new practice in drawing up wills. At a "safe" house in Havana, E. Howard Hunt Jr., recently retired as the CIA station chief in Uruguay, was on a secret mission observing Fidel Castro's Cuba and recommending to superiors that Fidel be assassinated. At the FBI headquarters in Washington, G. Gordon Liddy, a young Fordham law graduate, had finally realized his boyhood ambition of becoming a G-man.

And in Ohio, a bright, sandy-haired student at Wooster College was dating attractive co-eds and hoping his good memory would get him into law school the next year. His name: John Wesley Dean III.

TWELVE YEARS LATER, on June 17, 1972, the lives of all these men became "entangled in a web that would become known as Watergate. The beginnings were simple enough: a bungled burglary and bugging at the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee; five men arrested, among them the security coordinator of the Committee for the Re-election of the President. The President was Richard M. Nixon.

And, on June 17, 1972, Richard Nixon was approaching the kind of triumph that always had eluded him.

Now, less than a month before the Democratic National Convention, the President stood ahead of all announced opposition candidates by no less than 19 points in the polls. Richard Nixon's vision of an emerging Republican majority that would dominate the last quarter of the century, much as the Democrats had dominated two previous generations, appeared possible. The Democratic Party was in disarray as a brutal primary season approached its end. Sen. George McGovern of South Dakota, considered by the White House and Democratic Party professionals alike to be Nixon's weakest opponent, was emerging as the favorite to win the Democrats' nomination for President.

The morning after the arrest of five men inside the Watergate, a front-page story in The Washington Post noted: "There was no immediate explanation as to why the five suspects would want to bug the Democratic National Committee offices, or whether or not they were working for any other individuals or other organizations."

But at Key Biscayne, where the President was resting, and in California and Washington, where his men were meeting, the meaning of Watergate was all too clear.

IT IMPERILED NOT only the record of accomplishment of the first Nixon administration, but directly threatened the massive re-election mandate which the President, his aides and the pollsters were confident would be conferred by the voters in November. And, not insignificantly, it threatened Richard Nixon's place in history.

Unlike the rest of the nation that day, the President and his men then knew the real meaning of Watergate was not merely a "third-rate burglary," as Ronald L. Ziegler, the White House press secretary, had described it. Watergate—a term that would be hammered into the American consciousness and the soul of Richard Nixon's presidency for the next two years—represented something far more serious. To the President and his men, Watergate meant the potential exposure of the crimes of the Nixon administration—"The White House horrors," as John Mitchell would later derisively call them.

Mitchell, the Attorney General of the first Nixon administration and now the director of the President's re-election campaign, received word in California that Saturday of the arrests. While serving as the nation's highest-ranking law enforcement officer, he had been present at a meeting six months earlier when Liddy proposed to place the Democrats under electronic surveillance.

Now Mitchell dispatched Jeb Magruder, who had also attended that meeting, back to Washington. "The cover-up, thus, was immediate and automatic," Magruder wrote later. "No one ever considered that there would not be a cover-up."

That same day, John Dean, counsel to the President of the United States, arrived in California from a trip abroad and phoned the White House. He, too, had been at that initial meeting with Liddy, and at another as well where plans for illegal electronic surveillance of the Democrats were discussed. Upon learning of the arrests, he immediately flew to the capital. Watergate, he knew, was that "peek into the tent" that could bring the tent down.

But it was Richard Nixon, the hard political realist, who knew better than anyone what the collapse of that tent could do to his presidency. Thus it was the President who took the irrevocable step, six days after the break-in, of ordering his aides to insure that the FBI or the American people never learn what lay underneath: the wiretapping,

burglaries, cover-ups, lies, money-laundering, secret funds, enemies' lists, dirty tricks, "plumbers," physical surveillance, forged cables, attempted character assassinations, IRS audits . . . a veritable catalogue of illegal activities and abuses conceived and directed by the President and his men.

AS THE PRESIDENT himself, was forced to gradually reveal, he was the man behind the web of Watergate. It was his passion for secrecy that made the demise of his presidency inevitable. Similarly, it was his response to the threat of discovery that set in motion those forces which finally destroyed him.

In the end, it was finally possible to trace the repeated miscalculations which Richard Nixon had woven. There was no grand plan—for the illegal activities or for the attempts to hide them. But the single unraveling strand was the character, ideology and insecurity of Richard M. Nixon.

He totally failed to perceive the goodwill extended to any President by the people, the bureaucracy, the military, the press, his political party, Congress and the institutions of justice. Instead of using them as allies—in the tradition of his predecessors—he assumed their enmity. In the process, he eroded their ability to help him.

Perhaps there were times in these past two years when Richard Nixon could have saved himself and spared the people of this country the trauma of his ordeal. At crucial points in the conspiracy which finally brought him down, he spoke of "cutting our losses," of "hang-outs," even of telling the truth.

But as his own aides have sadly conceded he never did. Instead, he "stonewalled" to the end, even against his own lawyers, his most trusted aides and his staunchest political supporters in Congress and the country. It was Richard Nixon, observed a member of his staff, who had us wallow in Watergate. Almost, it now seems, from the day he took office and began his miscalculations—and his misreading of history—he made the unthinkable

possible: that a president would so abuse his vast powers that he would need to obstruct justice, provoke the reluctant institutions of the nation into action against him, and finally—be pushed from the pinnacle in disgrace.

RE-READING THE transcripts of his own tape recordings (which, characteristically contained the seeds of Mr. Nixon's destruction), the tragic pattern of the Nixon presidency becomes more clear.

As the tapes demonstrate, Mr. Nixon came to the White House full of suspicions and phobias and, apparently, a belief that his predecessors had routinely used the nation's highest office like the backroom of some political clubhouse. If he had any faith in the existing institutions of government, aside from the power of the executive, it is nowhere to be found in the tapes. Members of Congress, where he had served 14 years, were "assholes," to be loathed and manipulated; the IRS was a tool of the Democrats, to be turned into an instrument of retribution; the FBI was inept and, worse, unwilling to break the law in pursuing the enemies, real or imagined, of the White House; the nation's newspapers, which overwhelmingly supported his re-election, were after Nixon; the bureaucracy, those nameless, faceless and hidebound civil servants, were Kennedys, or little better, paper-pushing remnants of the Great Society; the Republican Party was committed not to Richard Nixon but to some vague ideals that drained off money and energy from the President's own electoral am-

bitions.

The President's men, as revealed on the tapes, shared the fearsome vision of their leader. Chapin, Dean, Krogh, Zeigler, Magruder, Colson, Porter, Strachan, Huston, Young, Haldeman, Ehrlichman. Willingly, even enthusiastically, they outdid each other with plans to "screw" the White House enemies, to supplant the security functions of the FBI with a squad of White House vigilantes, to undermine the electoral process through disruption of

the opposition party's primaries, to "fix" mock elections in high schools, to smear the reputations of politicians and public servants of both parties and—finally—to undermine the administration of justice.

PERHAPS SIGNIFICANTLY, the men closest to the President had never held public office nor sought it. They came from the worlds of marketing and public relations and advertising and real estate and the practice of civil law. They were bright, able and, above all else, zealous. There were others, of course cast from a different mold—schooled in government service, the Congress, the executive departments, the diplomatic corps, the line agencies, even academia. But they were the outsiders, barred from the Oval Office by the choice of the President, described contemptuously on the tapes by Mr. Nixon and treated with condescension by the eager patrol of beavers under the control of Haldeman, the keeper of the door to the inner sanctum of power.

In his time of crisis, the President rarely called on those who could have helped him—and then only to manipulate them, the tapes show, not to seek their counsel. Thus, in his unique recorded contribution to American history, President Nixon has left us not so much an index to his own character and those around him, but a remarkable drama of conspiracy and tragedy, sweeping in scope, vainglorious and venal.

Listened to in retrospect, the drama unfolds swiftly, the miscalculations providing the finale to each stunning act:

The decision to hire Liddy ("He must be a little bit nuts huh?" the President asks after it is too late); to engage the CIA in the cover-up; to make the conduct of the press the issue, not the actions of his men; to lie continually ("What really hurts in a matter of this sort is not the fact that they occur," he told the American people, "because overzealous people in campaigns do things that are wrong. What really hurts is if you try to cover

it up. . . "); to invoke the sanctity of "national security" long after the President himself cast that legitimate concern into disrepute; to mistake the mandate of 1972 for license to undermine the Constitution.

And yet the cover-up continued. As the circle drew tighter, increasingly the President was forced to assume more personal direction of the conspiracy. One of the conspirators cracked, and still the President sought ways to keep the others silent. It was only after his personal aides faced certain indictment that he dismissed them. He agreed to the hiring of a special prosecutor, confident that such an extraordinary office could be manipulated in the same manner as his own discredited Justice Department. Faced with the disastrous consequences of that decision, he fired the prosecutor—and then replaced him with a successor equally independent and aggressive. He defied the courts, only to back down in humiliation.

Forced by the courts to turn over material he knew to be self-incriminating, he relinquished only part of it—but still enough for a grand jury of ordinary citizens to name him as a co-conspirator. Aware that his tapes would be made public, he senselessly released transcripts of his conversations at variance with the originals. His credibility long before destroyed, his explanations became more and more implausible.

Finally trapped, he was stripped of all defenses but one: that he was the embodiment of the presidency—above reproach, above the law, above sanction. But in the end, even those who had pleaded his case for so long found at last the reason to abandon Richard Nixon. He had disgraced not just himself. He had demeaned the presidency. Yet in leaving office, he may have bequeathed a legacy of restoration.

The authors are metropolitan staff reporters for The Washington Post who have covered the Watergate story since June 17, 1972. They are the authors of "All the President's Men," a narrative of the Watergate episode.

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