

The "Plumbers" and the Wiretaps

WHAT did he know? When did he know it?" These questions by Senator Howard Baker became one of the hallmarks of the televised Watergate hearings conducted by Senator Ervin's Select Committee. As the investigations and allegations spread, more and more members of the White House staff were being asked to account for a wider and wider range of decisions. The break-in and cover-up at Watergate and the burglary of the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist came to be linked with controversial foreign policy decisions that were totally unrelated. The bombing of Cambodia or covert operations in Chile were thrown into the cauldron and pursued in an effort to vindicate a philosophical and political point of view by quasi-judicial proceedings. Inevitably, I as security adviser during the period in question became involved in the controversy. Early in the Watergate ordeal, Nixon's enemies had a vested interest in focusing all attention on him and in leaving those conducting foreign policy out of the general assault. As Nixon weakened, even more after he left office, the few survivors of the debacle became the targets for those drawing emotional sustenance from Watergate. That small minority feeding on its resentments sometimes seemed to imply that there had been no President making decisions, only a security adviser.

I shall deal with Cambodia and Chile elsewhere. I knew nothing of the Watergate break-in, or the burglary of Ellsberg's psychiatrist. The area of activity that critics have emphasized is the effort to protect national security information. For the sake of a complete record I shall deal with it here.

The Office of the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs must self-evidently be concerned with safeguarding military and diplomatic secrets. A nation that cannot be trusted to maintain the confidentiality of sensitive exchanges loses the ability to conduct diplomacy. It will be crippled in negotiations; it will be deprived of crucial information. If every exploratory contact immediately becomes public before even the reaction of the other side can be ascertained, the frank communications so necessary to clarify positions cannot take place. Diplomacy becomes trench warfare. If internal deliberations are leaked, foreign governments gain an advantage and candid advice to the President by his colleagues is inhibited.

No doubt administrations tend to confuse what is embarrassing politically with what is essential for national security — the Nixon Administration perhaps more than most. Fairness dictates acknowledgment, however, that few administrations since the Civil War faced a more bitter assault on their purposes, a more systematic attempt to thwart their policies by civil disobedience, or a more widely encouraged effort

to sabotage legitimate and considered policies by tendentious leaks of classified information in the middle of a war.

As security adviser I thought it my duty to help stanch these leaks. We had to demonstrate to the world, to friends as well as adversaries, that we could conduct a serious foreign policy even in the midst of bitter controversy; that we were worthy of confidence and capable of guarding the secrets of others. If our government remained passive when stolen documents became media currency, confidence and the ability to negotiate would be undermined.

The issue became particularly acute in June 1971 when 7,000 pages of confidential files on Indochina from the Kennedy and Johnson presidencies — the so-called Pentagon Papers — were leaked to the press. None of these documents was embarrassing to the Nixon Administration. They could have been used to support the proposition that we had inherited a mess, and some in the Nixon White House urged that we exploit them in this way. Indeed, at the beginning I thought that our own people had leaked the documents for precisely that purpose. When I learned of their publication, I spoke to Haig from California demanding that the culprit be severely punished.

But from the beginning Nixon thought it improper to place the blame for the Vietnam war on his predecessors. In his view he owed it both to those who had given years to that struggle, and to the families of the dead, not to discredit their sacrifice as the error of one President. He was rewarded for this generosity by seeing many of those who had made the decisions to send troops encourage the civil disobedience that so complicated the efforts to extricate them. Thus, when the Pentagon Papers became public, Nixon was consistent. He rejected a partisan response. He took the view that the failure to resist such massive, and illegal, disclosures of classified information would open the floodgates, undermining the processes of government and the confidence of other nations. Nor was his a purely theoretical concern. We were at that very moment on the eve of my secret trip to Peking; we were engaged in private talks with Hanoi that we thought — incorrectly, as it turned out — were close to a breakthrough; and we were exploring a possible summit with Moscow, together with a whole host of sensitive negotiations from a Berlin settlement to SALT. All these efforts would be jeopardized if the impression grew that our government was on the run and its discipline was disintegrating. And it was obvious that the motive of both the theft and the publication of the Pentagon Papers was political warfare to force us to accept terms on Vietnam that we considered dishonorable.

I shared Nixon's views; I almost certainly reinforced them. I believed then, and do now, that our system of government will lose all coherence if each President uses his control over the process of declassification to

smear his predecessors, or if he treats the defense of secret documents as a question of partisan expediency. I certainly felt strongly that the executive branch had to be perceived as resisting such a massive breach of trust. I was aware of the legal steps to attempt to enjoin publication in the courts; I was not formally consulted about them but I considered it the correct decision.

But until I read about it in the newspapers, I knew nothing of the White House "Plumbers unit" burglary of the office of the psychiatrist of Daniel Ellsberg, the admitted perpetrator of the Pentagon Papers theft. The break-in was sordid, puerile, and self-defeating: It aborted the criminal trial of the individual who flaunted his defiance of the laws against such unauthorized disclosures. I have difficulty to this day understanding the rationale for the break-in; had the psychiatrist's documents proved Ellsberg unstable it would have helped his defense rather than the government's cause. But if it was stupid practically, it was inexcusable on moral grounds; a White House-sponsored burglary conducted with no color of law enforcement authority cannot be anything but a disgrace.

The "Plumbers unit" — so called because its job was to stop leaks — was part of John Ehrlichman's office. As with several other aspects of Watergate — the enemies list, for example — the infantile nomenclature did more than the substance of the activities to raise the presumption of sinister purpose. In itself there was nothing startling about assigning two staff members to look into leaks of classified documents. The need for it appears to have been compounded in Nixon's mind by his growing distrust of J. Edgar Hoover, then the Director of the FBI. By 1971 Nixon had become convinced that Hoover would conduct investigations assigned to him capriciously, stopping at nothing to destroy individuals who had incurred his displeasure or jarred some personal prejudice, going easy on suspects where there was a personal link. Nixon believed that Hoover's friendship with Ellsberg's father-in-law would prevent a serious investigation of the Pentagon Papers theft. Moreover, Hoover was quite capable, Nixon thought, of using the knowledge he acquired as part of his investigations to blackmail the President. Nixon was determined to get rid of Hoover at the earliest opportunity after the 1972 election and he wanted to supply no hostages that might impede this process.*

What was striking about the "Plumbers" was not their existence but that the assignment should have been given to two such clean-cut, middle-class young men who had no investigative training whatever. Egil Krogh and David R. Young looked like advertisements of the decent, idealistic young American. And fundamentally that is what they were. I barely knew Krogh, but had brought David Young to Washington after

* Hoover died in early May 1972.

having made his acquaintance in Nelson Rockefeller's office. He became my personal assistant because I wanted near me somebody who I considered had ability, high moral standards, and dedication. The appointment did not work out because Young ran afoul of the redoubtable Haig, who carefully protected his access to me, and because Young was overqualified for the kind of work the position required. In January 1971 Young was shifted from my immediate office to a make-work job of research in the White House Situation Room. He was rightly dissatisfied with this assignment and happy when Ehrlichman hired him in July 1971, while I was on the secret trip to China. Upon my return the job was presented to me as — and indeed it was, at first — an interagency review of the declassification system. Ehrlichman's hiring of Young was not uninfluenced by the petty jealousies of the White House staff; he lost no opportunity to rub it in that he knew how to use talented men better than I. I, in turn, was displeased that Ehrlichman had recruited one of my staff members without consulting me and while I was out of the country. From this assignment, or as part of it — I never knew which — David Young found his way to the "Plumbers."

The essentially pointless question of whether "I knew about the Plumbers" became another controversy in the Kafkaesque atmosphere of Watergate. Unbelievable as it may appear to the outsider, it is difficult to reconstruct what others in a large bureaucracy thought one knew. I was, of course, fully aware that Ehrlichman's office had responsibility for investigating security leaks, though the details were carefully kept from me except when they affected my office directly. I did not realize, or bother to inform myself, that a special unit existed to investigate security leaks and that its members essentially had no other duties. I assumed instead that staff members were assigned to conduct these investigations on an ad hoc basis, including Krogh and Young, though it is quite possible that Krogh and Young thought I knew that theirs was a full-time mission all along. But even had I known this, I would not have found it improper that the White House sought to protect its classified information by an investigative unit, so long as it operated within the law. Nor do I think to this day that the "Plumbers unit" — apart from the burglary — was illegal or improper given the context of the time.*

Another episode, and one in which I did play a part, was the installation of seventeen wiretaps on individuals between May 1969 and February 1971. I reported on the wiretapping in my first volume,⁸ but I return to it here because it became known in 1973. The mysterious "national security matters" that Nixon had spoken of the night before Haldeman and Ehrlichman resigned turned out to be the wiretap records,

*The "Plumbers" issue came up periodically afterward. See Chapters XVIII and XXIV.