

Watergate: Forty Years Later

by Angelo Lano (1960-1989)

The nature of an FBI agent's work is anonymous. Usually it involves collecting facts, often with a team of agents whose names will disappear in a myriad of files over the ensuing years and decades leaving only the larger story for future generations to study. When I became an FBI agent, I fully expected and hoped to remain one of those "anonymous" team members who would fade from the scene into obscurity with only the case record remaining. As fate would have it – that was not to be.

For me, the Watergate story began routinely enough on the night of June 17, 1972 when the telephone rang at my home. The caller was Ernie Belter, an FBI agent and Washington Field Office Technical Supervisor. Belter told me rather matter-of-factly that five men had just been arrested, trying to burglarize an office at the Watergate Complex. Bob Kunkle, the SAC, wanted me to get the facts along with the identity of the burglars, and report back to him. Kunkle assured me that it all could be wrapped-up "in a couple of hours."

Such off-hour calls were not unusual for me. When I arrived as a second office agent at WFO in June 1968, I was assigned to the C-2 Squad where I handled a mixed collection of reactive cases such as Theft of Government Property, Interstate Transportation of Stolen Property as well as bombing matters and even Illegal Interception of Communications. So, I wasn't alarmed by Belter's call or Kunkle's orders.

The now infamous Watergate Complex is actually a cluster of five ultra-exclusive office buildings, condominiums and hotel situated in Washington's DC's Foggy Bottom neighborhood overlooking the Potomac River and next door to the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Among its many "A-List" residents at the time were a handful of U.S. senators, ambassadors and other high ranking government officials. Over the previous few years, a number of burglaries had occurred there, including one brazen theft from the apartment of Rosemary Woods, President Nixon's personal secretary — I never solved any of them. The Watergate had simply become my beat, on which I worked side by side with the Burglary Unit of the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD).

About an hour after Belter's call, C-2 agent, Peter Paul and I walked into MPD's Second District Office in Northwest Washington, where, unsurprisingly, I ran into three or four of my burglary squad buddies. As we made our way down the hall, we quickly realized that this was no ordinary break-in, when we saw MPD Deputy Chief of Police Larry Monroe and Assistant United States Attorney, Charley Work waiting for

us. Work quickly summed up the facts of the case for us as they then stood. Earlier in the evening, the cops had arrested five males inside the offices of the Democratic National Headquarters. Four of them gave Hispanic names with the fifth

simply calling himself "Ed Martin." They clearly didn't look like ordinary knuckleheads either. All wore business suits and rubber gloves; all were carrying sequentially numbered C and F Series one hundred dollar bills totaling \$3,500, and one of them had a handie-talkie device. Work then showed me a carrying bag containing two Minolta 35 Millimeter cameras along with a "fire alarm" housing unit containing a small microphone attached to wires and three black devices with attached clips and more wires wrapped in tissue paper. (Belter later confirmed that they were police radio scanners.)

None of them were talking. Reinforcing this reality was the sudden appearance of a local attorney named Douglas Caddy, demanding to consult with his "clients." What struck us all as odd was that none of the five had been permitted a telephone call. When asked how he learned of the arrests, Caddy remained silent. At this point, Paul and I looked at each other and without a word passing between us, we acknowledged that this case was going to take a lot longer than a couple of hours.

The mystery only deepened when the FBI's Identification Division identified the fingerprints of our suspects. The four Hispanics were Bernard Barker, Frank Sturgis, Virgilio Gonzalez and Eugenio Martinez. Ed Martin turned out to be James Walter McCord. All five had been previously fingerprinted by the CIA, with McCord revealed as a former FBI agent and Agency employee. MPD had also learned that McCord was then working as the head of security for CREEP – the Committee to Re-Elect the President.

Kunkle, now fully briefed, arranged for search warrants for two rooms rented by the burglars at the Watergate



Nixon leaving White House

Hotel. The search uncovered additional sequentially numbered “C” and “F” series one hundred dollar bills, two telephone address books, one belonging to Barker, another to someone named “Howard Hunt” and an envelope addressed to a local country club bearing Hunt’s name and address.

Over the next several hours, our investigation really started ramping up with Kunkle calling up additional agents to begin file reviews and interviews. Our records soon revealed Hunt as a former CIA employee. A White House “Special Inquiry” investigation showed his current employment as some kind of consultant to the White House. A call to a White House official, Alexander Butterfield, revealed that Hunt’s boss was Charles Colson, an aide to President Nixon. While Peter Paul and Don Stuckey scoured Washington for Hunt, other agents began making late night calls to Langley to determine the current relationship of the five men with CIA. Secret Service agents were now awake, tracing the one hundred dollar bills while Miami agents started beating the bushes for information on the four Cubans and their links with the CIA and Hunt. In the midst of all of this, I briefed Henry Peterson, then serving as Deputy Attorney General, who ordered me to call him again at noon on Sunday so he could brief the Attorney General. As for Kunkle, he briefed Mark Felt, then substituting for the newly appointed Acting-Director, L. Patrick Gray, who was traveling in California.

By Monday, June 19 our investigation had taken us to the Howard Johnson Hotel, across New Hampshire Avenue from the Watergate when the hotel manager recognized McCord’s photo from the newspaper. McCord had rented two rooms at the hotel in May, where he had made a number of long-distance calls including some to a Connecticut number listed to Mrs. A. Baldwin. She turned out to be the mother of Alfred Baldwin, a former FBI agent and a CREEP Security Officer. (Later that week Baldwin’s attorney refused to make him available for interviews until he had spoken with the prosecutors.)

The next day, Miami reported that the Federal Reserve Bank in Atlanta had shipped the sequential Series C hundred dollar bills to Republic National Bank where Bernard Barker had an account. Records there showed large April 1972 deposits into Barker’s account made up of four checks totaling \$80,000 drawn on a Mexico City bank and a fifth check for \$25,000 from a Miami bank. Barker then withdrew the funds receiving newly minted sequential one hundred dollar bills. (Series F bills had been shipped to Philadelphia’s Girard Bank where the trail went cold.)

With thirty-six hours of investigation now behind us, Bob Kunkle asked me candidly who I thought was behind the burglary. I must admit that at that point I believed that it was a botched CIA operation. My feelings were based on the rogues gallery of players then in custody. It didn’t take a Sherlock Holmes

to recognize that this crew was not a collection of ordinary thieves looking for cash and items that could be quickly pawned. They were the real deal. Then there were their links to the Agency, their sophistication and technical preparation, the large sums of money involved and the nagging silence on the matter from the CIA.

Five days after my late evening call from Belter, I found myself at the White House interviewing Charles Colson in the presence of Counselor to the President, John Dean. After blithely denying any knowledge of a break-in, Colson acknowledged that Hunt had an office in the Executive Office Building; a statement that surprised Dean. In response to Dean’s question about our interest in Hunt’s office, I explained that a federal grand jury subpoena had been issued for Hunt, who was still missing. I suggested that the contents of Hunt’s office could be useful in leading us to him, and any calls placed from his telephone could advance the FBI’s investigation as well. Dean agreed to offer any and all assistance.

Dean was lying. On June 26th the basic rules of evidence exposed him when two C-2 agents, Dan Mahan and Mike King, took custody from Dean of two boxes of evidence taken from Hunt’s office. (In one box, we found a 25 caliber pistol and a wig.) Later when Mahan and King returned to the White House to conduct a chain of custody investigation, they learned that Dean had ordered his deputy, Fred Fielding, to collect any and all material from Hunt’s office on June 19 — three days before our interview of Colson.

While we were at the White House pressing Colson, Kunkle was briefing Gray and Felt at FBI Headquarters, just a few blocks down Pennsylvania Avenue. The main suspicion was that the CIA was behind the operation. At the same time, however, the wily Kunkle warned that it was fairly common knowledge that an informal unit based at the White House known as the “Plumbers” had been created to investigate leaks of information.

Over the ensuing weeks as the investigation gained increasing steam, more and more memorable figures linked to the White House and CREEP began to emerge. The names included Jeb Magruder, Hugh Sloan, Dwight Chapin, Donald Segretti, Maurice Stans, CREEP’s finance director, together with former Attorney General John Mitchell who had left his Department of Justice job to run President Nixon’s reelection campaign and, of course, the infamous G. Gordon Liddy.



Watergate Complex

Everyone would later deny everything, yet all seemed linked in some way to the break-in and the money trail.

L. Patrick Gray, now back in Washington and in command, was under intense White House pressure to get control of the investigation. What we wouldn't learn until two years later, just weeks before he resigned, was President Nixon's desperate attempts to deflect the FBI's attention away from White House involvement. In what historians now call the June 23rd "Smoking Gun" conversation, one can clearly hear the President on tape at his desk in the Oval Office discussing ways to derail the Bureau's investigation with H.R. Halderman, his Chief of Staff. Halderman outlined for Nixon the progress of the case emphasizing the steady unraveling of the money trail. The FBI "is not under control because Gray doesn't exactly know how to control them" Halderman warned Nixon. Even more worrisome was the escalating pace of the investigation which was now leading into "some productive areas because they have been able to trace the money." When Nixon questioned Gray's reluctance to stop the investigation, Halderman assured him that the new Acting-Director did want to choke it off, but didn't know how and had no basis to do so. The President then suggested a plan that, in effect, constituted the felony of obstruction of justice. Halderman was ordered to instruct CIA director Richard Helms to tell Gray that the break-in was a covert Agency operation and that the Bureau should back off.

The order to Helms was a non-starter. First, the CIA director refused the president's order for fear of the serious harm it would do to the Agency. But, there was another more immediate reason. As it turned out, on the night of the burglary, Helms was roused out of his bed by a CIA official calling to inform him about the burglary and the arrests. A few hours later, the CIA director telephoned Gray, then traveling in California. After assuring the new Acting-Director that despite the "background of the apparent perpetrators," the CIA had nothing to do with the break-in. Gray listened politely but said little. Helms then suggested that the investigators examine the relationship of John Erlichman, the President's domestic policy advisor, with Hunt and McCord. Decades later in his memoir, Helms described telling an unresponsive Gray that Erlichman was very familiar with the circumstances in which "Hunt was hired for work at the White House and McCord's job on the committee to re-elect the President as well."

July 3, 1972 was a date I will never forget. A clearly agitated Gray, now fully aware of the CIA's position and desperately struggling to slow the investigation, summoned Mark Felt, Assistant Director Charley Bates, Kunkle, myself and another supervisor to his office for a conference on the Watergate case. I was not accustomed to dealing with Directors and Assistant Directors. I didn't move in those circles. Add to this the fact that I knew nothing of Gray except that he was the Acting-Director of the FBI, having replaced the legendary J. Edgar Hoover just weeks earlier, and now held the most important job in the FBI. So I was flabbergasted when he suddenly began yelling and wildly waving a copy of a WFO teletype I had written. I wrote it

in response to Headquarters' apparent foot-dragging and delays of authorization for interviews of John Mitchell and other senior White House and CREEP officials. A now furious Gray, completely unaccustomed to Bureau communications procedures, demanded to know the identity of the author who made seemingly disparaging remarks about him. After a few moments of stunned silence around the room, I threw caution to the wind by explaining to him that I wrote it and that the facts set forth were true; FBIHQ had inexplicably ordered the delay of certain interviews of White House officials, which the prosecutors considered essential. After I insisted that investigators were accustomed to conducting a complete and thorough inquiry, Gray backed off, indicating that he would urge Dean to move up the interviews.

Over the next five months, our investigation relentlessly moved on. By September, a grand jury had indicted the burglars along with Hunt and Liddy. In December, a month after Nixon's landslide re-election, Hunt and the five Cubans pled guilty. (McCord and Liddy were later found guilty after trial.) In February 1973, Judge John Sirica imposed jail sentences on all seven defendants. Then, in a surprise move that stunned everyone, the judge revealed his receipt of a letter from McCord suggesting that witnesses had perjured themselves during his trial and that, in fact, John Mitchell had authorized the break-in and illegal wiretapping.

McCord's letter was the first crack in the White House's stonewalling. It was the beginning of the end. The next eighteen months were a blur of high-profile criminal investigations, new and startling evidence of criminal conspiracy at the highest levels of our government, introduction of a new legal term called "Special Prosecutor" (and "Saturday Massacre" of Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox and the principled resignation of the Attorney General Elliott Richardson). There were also riveting televised Senate hearings, and amazingly accurate newspaper stories by two rookie *Washington Post* reporters named Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. In the midst of this national trauma, Nixon's Vice-President, Spiro Agnew, suddenly resigned in the wake of a federal indictment that sent him to jail as a common criminal. As Americans learned more of the shocking details of the Nixon tapes, their traditional trust in government seismically shifted to one of suspicion and disbelief, which continues today. Gone was the Imperial Presidency.

As for the President's men, they fell like dominoes. Gray withdrew his nomination in the spring of 1973 following revelations that he kept Dean up-to-date on the progress of the FBI investigation. Colson, Magruder, Stans, Mitchell, Halderman, Erlichman and Dean, just to name a few, went to jail. The President resigned in disgrace and the identity of "Deep Throat," the source who provided FBI information to *The Washington Post*, remained a topic of speculation for decades to come. So much for a couple of hours of work.

You know, as I think back on it, the month of June has always been somewhat eventful for me in my FBI career. I arrived at WFO on June 18, 1968. Belter called me on June 17, 1972. I got my OP to Baltimore on June 17, 1975. That's my story. Now I can slip back into obscurity.