

The Watergate complex as it looked in 1973. The smaller building to the right is a Howard Johnson’s hotel.

‘A THIRD-RATE BURGLARY’

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

A half-century ago today, five men were caught breaking into and trying to place surveillance devices at the Democratic National Committee headquarters in Washington D.C.’s ritzy Watergate office and residential complex.

It would take months of investigative work by police, federal agents and reporters for the Washington Post for the truth to come out: The men were sent and funded by people who worked directly for the president.

The bungled operation would eventually topple the administration of Richard M. Nixon.

AN OPERATION DOOMED FROM THE START

In March 1972, officials working for the White House and for Richard Nixon’s reelection campaign cooked up a plan to sabotage their opponents in the upcoming election by spying on Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate office complex.

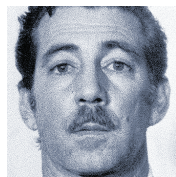
The operation was headed up by Nixon campaign lawyer and former FBI agent G. Gordon Liddy and Howard Hunt Jr., a former CIA agent who Nixon had assigned the duty of hunting down bothersome leaks to the press by White House staffers.

Hunt recruited four operatives from Cuba who had worked with him previously on anti-Fidel Castro missions. The team of so-called “plumbers” was led by another former CIA agent, James McCord.



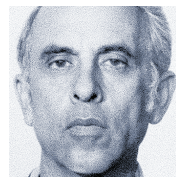
Bernard Barker

SERVED: 14 months



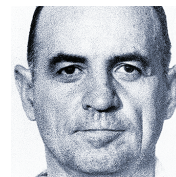
Virgilio Gonzalez

SERVED: 16 months



Eugenio Martinez

SERVED: 15 months



James McCord

SERVED: 4 months



Frank Sturgis

SERVED: 16 months

On Jan. 14, 1973, all four would plead guilty to conspiracy, burglary and wiretapping. McCord would be released early after cooperating with investigators.

On May 28, 1972, the team broke into the DNC office at the Watergate, photographed documents and planted wiretaps on various phones. Afterward, it was discovered that the

photos of documents were unreadable and that the team had tapped the wrong phones. A second break-in was planned for June 17. This time, the team was detected by a

security guard and arrested by police — in part because another operative serving as a “lookout” in a Howard Johnson’s hotel room across the street had become engrossed in a horror movie, “Attack of the Puppet People,” that was playing on TV that night.

Police found the burglars in possession of \$2,300 — most of it in \$100 bills with serial numbers in sequential order — along with radio equipment, cameras and 35 rolls of undeveloped film. One of them also had a notebook listing the White House phone number of Nixon’s reelection committee.

While covering the burglars’ hearing the next day, Washington Post reporter Bob Woodward was startled when McCord told the judge he had worked for the CIA.

THE ARRESTS SET OFF A GRAND COVER-UP

While the Post reported the ties the burglars had to the White House, Nixon officials denied any link to the crime. Nixon’s press secretary, Ron Ziegler, dismissed the incident as “a third-rate burglary attempt.”

But three days later Nixon discussed the break-in with his chief of staff, H.R. Haldeman. That conversation was captured by recording equipment Nixon had installed in his offices.

In August, the Post reported that a check for \$25,000 that had been earmarked for Nixon’s reelection campaign had been deposited into the bank account of one of the burglars. A month later, the Post reported further that former Attorney

General John Mitchell had controlled a secret fund to pay for intelligence gathering against Democrats. On Sept. 15, seven men — the five burglars plus Hunt and Liddy — were indicted in the break-in. Most would plead guilty the following January. Liddy and McCord would stand trial that month and would both be convicted. Nixon was reelected to office in November in a landslide. But by spring, things were falling apart quickly for the White House. Caught in the growing scandal, Haldeman and another Nixon aide, John Ehrlichman, were compelled to resign. White House counsel John Dean was

fired and began cooperating with Watergate prosecutors. In May, a Senate committee began holding televised hearings on Watergate. In July 1973, former Nixon deputy chief of staff Alexander Butterfield revealed the existence of Nixon’s taping system. This set off a scramble by prosecutors to find evidence of when Nixon might have first learned of the break-in and how deeply he might have been involved in the cover-up. That October, Nixon — frustrated with ongoing demands for the tapes — had the special prosecutor on the case fired. A month later, it was revealed a key tape — the one of Nixon’s conversation with Haldeman, three days after

the break-in — contained a mysterious 18½-minute gap. Experts would later determine the tape had been deliberately erased multiple times. In July 1974, the Supreme Court ruled Nixon must surrender the tapes. That month, the House Judiciary Committee adopted three articles of impeachment against the president. The tapes revealed that Nixon had ordered the FBI to halt its investigation of the break-in and had directed other aspects of the cover-up as well. Nixon’s political support quickly dissipated as Republicans on the Judiciary Committee who had voted against impeachment announced they would change their votes.

ALL THE PRESIDENT’S MEN

A number of Nixon aides and officials would serve jail time for their parts in the Watergate break-in and cover-up:



Charles Colson
White House lawyer in charge of political affairs
CHARGE: Pleaded guilty to obstruction of justice
SENTENCE: 1 to 3 years
SERVED: 7 months



John Dean
White House counsel
CHARGE: Pleaded guilty to obstruction of justice
SENTENCE: 1 to 5 years
SERVED: 4 months



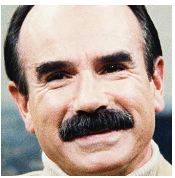
John Ehrlichman
Assistant to Nixon in charge of domestic affairs
CHARGES: Conspiracy, obstruction of justice and perjury
SENTENCE: 2½ to 8 years
SERVED: 18 months



H.R. Haldeman
Nixon’s chief of staff
CHARGES: Perjury, conspiracy and obstruction of justice
SENTENCE: 2½ to 8 years
SERVED: 18 months



E. Howard Hunt
Former CIA operative in charge of stopping leaks
CHARGES: Burglary, conspiracy and wiretapping
SENTENCE: 2½ to 8 years
SERVED: 33 months



G. Gordon Liddy
Lawyer for Nixon’s re-election campaign
CHARGES: Conspiracy, burglary and wiretapping
SENTENCE: 6 years, 8 months
SERVED: Nearly 52 months



Jeb Magruder
White House communications advisor
CHARGE: Conspiracy
SENTENCE: 10 months to 4 years
SERVED: 7 months



John Mitchell
Attorney General and Nixon campaign director
CHARGES: Conspiracy, obstruction of justice and perjury
SENTENCE: 2½ to 8 years
SERVED: 19 months



Donald Segretti
Ran political sabotage for Nixon’s re-election campaign
CHARGE: Pleaded guilty to distributing illegal campaign literature.
SENTENCE: 6 months
SERVED: 4½ months

On Aug. 8, 1974, Nixon told a national TV audience he would resign the presidency. He said he had never been a quitter and that leaving office “is abhorrent to every instinct in my body.” But, as president, he would put the nation’s interests first.

The next day, Nixon made a farewell speech in the East Room of the White House before heading out to the South Lawn to board his helicopter. At the top of the steps, Nixon paused to flash his signature double-V-for-victory sign. Shortly after his departure, Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger swore in Vice President Gerald Ford as president.



On Sept. 8, 1974 — just short of a month after Nixon’s resignation, Ford granted Nixon a “full, free and absolute” pardon to Nixon for “all offenses against the United States.” Ford told the nation that Nixon’s circumstances were “a tragedy in which we all have played a part. It could go on and on and on, or someone must write the end to it. I have concluded that only I can do that. And if I can, I must.”