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A new Watergate revelation:

THE WHITE HOUSE DEATH SQUAD

BY JONATHAN MARSHALL

MUGGING SQUADS, KIDnapping, sabotage, the use of prostitutes for political blackmail, break-ins to obtain and photograph documents, and various forms of electronic surveillance and wiretapping. These were some of the elements of G. Gordon Liddy's million-dollar plan—described by Jeb Magruder—to win the 1972 presidential election for Richard Nixon, as he presented it to John Mitchell. "It's not quite what I had in mind," said the attorney general, as he sent Liddy back to the drawing board to come up with something less ambitious and costly.

What Mitchell may not have realized —and what Nixon may have meant when he said, "did Mitchell know about this?"—was that Liddy and his coconspirator E. Howard Hunt had already begun to implement an even more sensitive and dangerous operation: the recruitment of a secret army of Cuban exiles, answerable only to the White House, and equipped to assassinate foreign leaders.

On August 15, 1973, President Nixon told a press conference that upon learning of a Justice Department investigation of the "plumbers' squad" burglary of the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist, he became "gravely concerned that other activities of the Special Investigative Unit might be disclosed, because I knew this could seriously injure the national security." Nixon never identified these "other activities," and at the time his words seemed to be no more than a lame justification for his cover-up of Watergate. But a new investigation of this clandestine White House unit reveals that Nixon may have had a much bigger cover-up in mind: Specifically, had the arrests at Watergate not disrupted their plans, Hunt and Liddy were prepared to carry out at least one assassination plot — against Panamanian leader Omar Torrijos.

> "Of course this Hunt, that will uncover a lot of things. You open that scab there's a hell of a lot of things and we just feel that it would be very detrimental to have this thing go any further. This involves these Cubans, Hunt, and a lot of hanky-panky that we have nothing to do with ourselves. Well what the hell, did Mitchell know about this?"--President Nixon, White House conversation, June 23, 1972.

The plot against Torrijos was a product of the twin preoccupations with political enemies and drugs that were the hallmark of Nixon's Special Investigations Unit. Formed in mid-1971, when John Ehrlichman ordered his aide Egil Krogh to probe the leaking of the Pentagon papers, the unit operated out of Room 16 of the Executive Office Building. There Gordon Liddy and Walter Minnick helped Krogh coordinate the administration's "war on drugs," a struggle that Nixon described in his message to Congress of June 17, 1971, as nothing less than "a national emergency." It was this "war on drugs" that provided the Plumbers with their ostensible rationale for the conspiracy against Torrijos: The White House suspected the Panamian leader of aiding and abetting known narcotics traffickers. But the plot against Torrijos was more than just law enforcement gone wild. Like so many of the other secret operations of the Nixon White House, it was an effort to destroy a political enemy who dared to challenge the White House's definition of the national interest.

Nixon's Drug War

*THE NIXON ADMINISTRA*tion's suspicion that leading Panamanian officials were involved in the drug traffic was by no means unjustified. By 1970–1971, the Customs Bureau and the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs (BNDD) were busy smashing the enormously successful Corsican–Latin American drug networks of Auguste Ricord. With Ricord and many of his associates arrested or on the run, BNDD and Customs began focusing on Panama as a key transshipment point for Latin American narcotics destined for the U.S. market.

On February 6, 1971, American police arrested Joaquin Him Gonzales, chief of air traffic control at Panama's international airport, in the Canal Zone. They had lured him onto American-controlled territory to watch a softball game; after the arrest he was flown in a military plane to Texas, where a sealed indictment awaited him. The Panamanian government expressed outrage at the kidnapping of an important government official; the Department of State deplored the straining of relations with Panama. Joaquin Him got five years for the

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narcotics charge.

Six months later, Rafael Richard, Jr., son of Panama's ambassador to Taiwan, was arrested in New York with 154 pounds of heroin. Richard carried a diplomatic passport and tried unsuccessfully to claim immunity. U.S. officials noted with interest that Panama's Foreign Minister Juan Tack had signed the passport and that Moises Torrijos, brother of the Panamanian strongman, had helped obtain it for young Rafael.

On the basis of this arrest and other intelligence reports, BNDD and Customs officials now suspected that the Panamanian government had been corrupted at its highest levels. As Jack Anderson confirmed on March 14, 1972, "American narcotics agents have implicated the foreign minister of Panama and the brother of Panamanian dictator Omar Torrijos in a scheme to smuggle hundreds of pounds of heroin into the United States." Sometime in the spring of 1972, according to recently obtained Justice Department documents, a federal grand jury handed down a sealed indictment against Moises Torrijos. As long as Panamanian officials stayed off U.S. soil, however, there was little the administration could do through normal legal channels.

Nixon urged that $100 million be spent on a secret program to kidnap and wipe out narcotics traffickers.

But then, the administration had never committed itself to working solely through normal legal channels. In May 1971, the White House asked John Ingersoll, director of the BNDD, to draft a plan for "clandestine law enforcement" in the drug field—including assassination. By May 27, 1971, Nixon, John Ehrlichman, and Egil Krogh had agreed to secretly budget $100 million for a covert BNDD kidnap and assassination program. "This decisive action," read the minutes of the meeting, "is our only hope for destroying or immobilizing the highest level of drug traffickers." BNDD officials began talking openly of the need to establish "hit squads": With only "150 key assassinations," several BNDD officials told Dr. J. Thomas Ungerleider of the National Commission on Marijuana and Drug Abuse, "the entire heroin refining operation can be thrown into chaos." Krogh himself admitted that assassinations took place in Southeast Asia, and John Dean, in a recent interview, revealed that Krogh once asked him to help resolve a dispute between the BNDD, the Pentagon, and the State Department over the legality of kidnapping drug traffickers in Latin America.

On January 10, 1972, undoubtedly in response to White House pressure for more action on the narcotics front, Ingersoll asked his staff to consider the possible "immobilization and/or neutralization" of Colonel Manuel Noriega, chief of intelligence for Panama's Guardia Nacional, whom the BNDD suspected of involvement in the heroin trade. According to a still-secret report of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, the options outlined in the five-page report included:

> Linking the official [Noriega] to a fictitious plot against General Torrijos . . . , leaking information on drug trafficking to the press; linking his removal to the Panama Canal negotiations; secretly encouraging powerful groups within Panama to raise the issue; and 'total and complete immobilization.'

It has also been alleged that two leading BNDD officials, Phillip Smith and William Durkin, took part in discussions of whether to assassinate Omar Torrijos. These allegations are contained in a secret 1975 Justice Department report—known as the DeFeo report, after one of its coauthors—that outlined to the attorney general "allegations of fraud, irregularity, and misconduct in the Drug Enforcement Administration," the agency that succeeded the BNDD. (The Justice Department, by the order of Attorney General Edward Levi, closely guarded the contents of this report. Even the Senate Intelligence Committee, although granted access to the report, was not given a copy.) According to the DeFeo report, Smith denied any such plotting, but claimed instead that he passed on to the CIA information he had received about a conspiracy to kill the Panamanian general. However, the DeFeo report also mentions charges—corroborated by the existence of the Ingersoll option paper—that "a discussion concerning assassinations involved the possibility of killing Mr. Noryago [*sic*], the principal assistant to the President of Panama, and that Smith and William Durkin actually proposed that he be killed." (Durkin, then chief of criminal enforcement, retired from the DEA in December 1978. Smith, now head of security for the Resorts International casino in Atlantic City, was chief of special projects.)

A follow-up Justice Department report found "no evidence that any overt acts occurred which could be characterized as criminal violations of law." In other words, Noriega is still alive. However, as the Senate report states without further elaboration, "some" of the options presented to Ingersoll "were put into action." Thus, the BNDD waged a successful campaign of press leaks, through Jack Anderson and the anti-Torrijos press in Latin America, to encourage Torrijos's opponents and to shame the regime into cracking down on official corruption. The BNDD was probably behind the detailed and informed charges printed in *La Hora* in Panama on January 29, 1972, accusing Omar Torrijos of protecting the drug "mafia." Before Torrijos could shut down the presses, several thousand copies of the newspaper had been circulated. And four days after the arrests at Watergate, Ingersoll visited Panama to warn Torrijos, according to transcripts of their meeting, that "narcotics enforcement is in your government's best interest. Failure to do so effectively could result in further embarrassment to your government." The chastened general in turn "promised full cooperation with BNDD" in "stopping the traffic."

The Torrijos Plot

WHILE THE WHITE House pressured the BNDD to use any means to eliminate Panama's drug traffickers, it was secretly mounting its own deadly campaign against General Torrijos. The top operators in this theater of the "war on drugs" were Gordon Liddy and E. Howard Hunt.

Liddy, a former district attorney from New York, had joined the Nixon administration in 1969 as special assistant to the secretary of the treasury,

with responsibility for law enforcement functions of the Customs Bureau, the Internal Revenue Service, and the Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms Bureau. In that capacity, he organized in 1969 the notorious "Operation Intercept," a disruption of traffic at the southern border that bludgeoned the Mexican government into accepting U.S. demands for greater participation in the narcotics "war." Liddy lost his job at the Treasury Department for making an unauthorized speech against gun control, but he soon went to work for Egil Krogh in the White House. There he began recommending formation of a White House–controlled drug enforcement unit to free Nixon from the bureaucratic resistance of entrenched agencies in the Justice and Treasury departments.

E. Howard Hunt, a retired career CIA agent then working for the Mullen Agency, a CIA-connected PR firm, went to work for the White House on July 7, 1971, as a $100-a-day consultant. Hunt was known around the White House as an adviser on the Far East narcotics traffic, but secretly he began working with Liddy on clandestine political operations. His fees—and other expenses of the Special Investigations Unit (SIU)—were paid out of a secret $1.5 million White House Special Projects Fund.

Hunt was in a particularly good position to recruit loyal agents to carry out White House orders. As the CIA's political chief for the Bay of Pigs invasion, Hunt was on intimate terms with literally hundreds of anti-Castro Cuban exiles whose personal loyalties to Hunt, conservative politics, and clandestine skills would make them ideal SIU operatives.

Hunt visited Miami in the summer of 1971 to contact his old CIA friend Bernard Barker. Barker, who revered his former boss, had been the CIA's paymaster to the various exile groups. He had also served the agency as a secret informant during the 1950s, while a member of Batista's secret police, and later he helped establish the Nicaraguan and Guatemalan bases from which the exiles launched their invasion of Cuba.

Hunt had already sought out and met Barker that spring at a reunion of Bay of Pigs veterans in Miami. Now he asked Barker to join a new "national security organization . . . above both the CIA and FBI." The ever-loyal Barker jumped at the chance. Hunt gave Barker the task of recruiting CIA-trained anti-Castro exiles to be put at the disposal of the White House. Barker ultimately put together a secret army of 120 Cuban exiles; as he later described it, they were trained in every conceivable clandestine skill, including killing. One of their targets, it is now clear, was White House enemy Omar Torrijos.

The White House directed its huge army of Cuban exiles to "hit the mafia using the tactics of the mafia."

THERE HAVE BEEN SUGGESTIVE accounts of the White House campaign against Torrijos, but the full story has never been pulled together. On June 18, 1973, *Newsweek* offered an informed glimpse of those plots, and predicted John Dean would reveal their existence in his forthcoming Watergate testimony. "Dean's story is that the Administration suspected high Panamanian officials of being involved in the flow of heroin from Latin America into the U.S., and were also concerned about strongman Omar Torrijos's uncooperative attitude toward renegotiating the Panama Canal treaty," wrote *Newsweek*. "Thus, in Dean's telling, some officials found a Torrijos hit doubly attractive. The contract, he said, went to E. Howard Hunt, later a ringleader in the Watergate break-in; Hunt, according to Dean, had his team in Mexico before the mission was aborted." When his turn came to testify in public, Dean did not mention Panama, and in a recent interview he denied ever learning of Hunt's plans. The *Newsweek* reporter responsible for the story, however, while now admitting that his sources erred in assuming Dean's knowledge, insists that those sources accurately described the plot on the basis of first-hand knowledge.

Corroboration for the story has come from the participants themselves. Sometime after July 1971, Hunt approached Manuel Artime, who had headed the Bay of Pigs Cuban invasion force under Hunt's direction. In 1963 and 1964, Artime participated at a high level in CIA plots—said to include both Hunt and Barker—to kill Castro and invade Cuba anew. Artime remained a close friend both of Hunt (becoming godfather to one of Hunt's children) and of Barker (who smuggled Artime out of Cuba after Castro's takeover). Artime, in secret testimony before the Watergate grand jury in 1973, revealed that Hunt had asked him to join in disrupting the Panamanian narcotics traffic, saying "something had to be taken care of" in the Central American country. That mission, scheduled to take place after the election, was obviously aborted by Watergate, but not before Hunt introduced Artime to "a friend of the White House" named G. Gordon Liddy.

Artime, questioned by the grand jury for four hours about the Panama assassination project, denied having joined Hunt or recruiting other Cubans. But on November 3, 1974, former Cuban exile leader Carlos Rivero Collado, son of a former Cuban president, told a press conference: "Artime, approximately two years ago, was plotting to assassinate the chief of the Panamanian state, General Omar Torrijos. Artime had active, direct participation in the Watergate affair; however, his name has never been mentioned." (Artime was publicly identified only as a backer of the Miami Watergate Defendants' Fund.)

Whether or not Artime did join Hunt, Barker had no difficulty in recruiting a large number of other Cubans. Barker admits that the White House envisioned using his secret army in an all-out drug war: in Barker's words, "to hit the Mafia using the tactics of the Mafia."

Gordon Liddy must have relished the thought of commanding his Cuban troops. "He was a nut about guns and silencers and combat daggers and so on," recalls anti-Castro activist and Watergate burglar Frank Sturgis, "and he was always talking about 'disposal'—about killing people."

Nor was Hunt a stranger to such tactics. In his book on the Bay of Pigs invasion, *Give Us This Day*, Hunt tells of urging his superior in the clandestine division of the CIA to assassinate Castro "before or coincident with the invasion." All the CIA's Castro plots failed,

of course, but Hunt's fellow Plumber Frank Sturgis claims, "Howard was in charge of a couple of other CIA operations that involved 'disposal,' and I can tell you, some of them worked."

Sturgis admitted, after his arrest for the Watergate burglary, that he had joined Hunt in an "investigation" of the drug traffic from Mexico, Paraguay, and Panama. Sturgis was an old hand at clandestine activity. He claims to have worked variously for Israeli intelligence, Castro's air force, the U.S. Army Security Agency, and the CIA, devoting himself since 1959 to the overthrow of Communism in Cuba. In 1961, he joined Operation 40, a secret political and intelligence team charged by the CIA with forming a new government in Cuba following Castro's overthrow. Howard Hunt and Manuel Artime had used this "Cuban CIA" to purge the Bay of Pigs exile force of most of its liberal, anti-Batista elements. One branch of Operation 40 consisted of an elite murder squad, made up primarily of experienced killers from Batista's secret police. Several years ago Sturgis told an interviewer, "the assassination section, which I was a part of . . . would, upon orders naturally, assassinate either members of the military in the foreign country, members of the political parties of the foreign country that you were going to infiltrate, and if necessary some of your own members, who were suspected of being foreign agents." Sturgis says he took part in several pre-Operation 40 attempts against the life of Castro in 1959 and 1960, and claims to have engaged in subsequent plots in Central America.

When Frank Sturgis was caught inside the Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate building, he was carrying a Mexican visa made out in the name of Edward J. Hamilton. That name, it soon became clear, was E. Howard Hunt's old CIA alias; indeed the whole Watergate team carried phony identifications prepared by the CIA. Hunt had obtained the Mexican tourist card on January 7, 1972, valid for three months. Rumors began to circulate in Washington that the visa was obtained in connection with a task force Hunt had sent into Mexico for a "national security" operation against Torrijos.

Sturgis has been extremely reticent in recent years about his Watergate operations with Hunt and Liddy, telling interviewers only, "There are some things that I could never discuss." But shortly after the Watergate break-in he talked with Andrew St. George, an old friend of his, about the Panama plots. Sturgis apparently believed "the fix was in" on the Watergate job and that the Cubans would be released to continue on some of their other sensitive projects. "The White House has decided that dead or alive, Torrijos must go," St. George recalls Sturgis saying. "We must use terror."

Hunt says, "I think the feeling was that if Torrijos didn't shape up and cooperate he was going to be wasted."

Fortunately, we now have public confirmation of the plot from E. Howard Hunt himself. Shortly after Hunt was released from prison in February 1977, he was interviewed by a Boston television station. Asked whether he knew "anything about a project to eliminate Panama dictator Torrijos," Hunt for the first—and last—time made a startling admission. "Panama," he said, citing CIA reports, "was a drug trafficking area where drugs could move easily . . . with the blessing of the Panamanian government. There was a great deal of concern on the part of the drug officials and certainly on the part of some of the Latin American drug informants. *I think the feeling was that if Torrijos didn't shape up and cooperate he was going to be wasted.* That never happened. I don't know any of the people asked to participate other than the people in the Plumbers unit. They had that as part of their brief."

The Politics of Murder

WHY WAS THE WHITE House so anxious to "waste" the Panamanian dictator? After all, many other U.S. allies, particularly in Southeast Asia, also condoned narcotics trafficking, yet as far as we know, no one talked of bumping off French President Georges Pompidou just because his intelligence service was implicated in the "French Connection." For all the rhetoric about a "national emergency," the Nixon administration's "war on drugs" was as much an expedient political campaign as it was a sincerely held conviction. Why in any case did his agents not consider a less drastic fate for Torrijos?

Revulsion toward narcotics traffic can hardly explain the enthusiasm of Hunt's friends for the planned "hit," since most of them tolerated or even worked with organized crime when confronted by what they saw as the infinitely greater evil of Castro. CIA Director Richard Helms, for example, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in executive session that the CIA had released Bernard Barker from service in the mid-1960s because of his association with "gambling and criminal elements."

An FBI memo on Frank Sturgis prepared only two days after the Watergate arrests cited Miami sources who said "he is now associated with organized crime activities . . ." Sturgis's International Anti-Communist Brigade, active back in the early 1960s, was described by the attorney for one of its other leaders as being "financed by dispossessed hotel and gambling owners who operated under Batista." Many of these same interests, of course, had a stake in the pre-Castro Cuban heroin and cocaine traffic. We know also that Operation 40, of which Sturgis was a member, remained active as a CIA counterintelligence operation until 1970, when federal narcotics authorities arrested several of its leading members on charges of having masterminded the nation's largest heroin and cocaine ring.

Finally, we have the example of Manuel Artime, the "golden boy of the CIA," who received millions of dollars from the CIA to mount a second invasion of Cuba from Costa Rica in 1964—only to have a *Miami Herald* reporter poke around and discover that "a government cloak of secrecy over Cuban exile training was being used as a cover for smuggling."

Moreover, other known targets of the Room 16 team had always been *political* enemies of the White House. The Plumbers had originally organized under Egil Krogh to gather information to blackmail Daniel Ellsberg, whom the White House suspected of

knowing about its plans for escalating the war. When that mission failed, President Nixon the next spring ordered Ellsberg silenced by other means. On May 3, shortly before the mining of Haiphong harbor, J. Edgar Hoover's body lay in state in the Rotunda of the Capitol, and Ellsberg was expected to attend an unrelated antiwar demonstration outside. Once again Hunt called on Barker, who recruited a squad of 10 activists, including Frank Sturgis and Felipe de Diego (both formerly of the CIA's Operation 40); Angel Ferrer, head of Cubanos de Fort Jackson (an army commando training center); and Humberto Lopez, a leader of the violent National Front for the Liberation of Cuba. Their orders were to pose as patriotic Americans outraged at the lack of respect shown to Hoover by the demonstration and to beat up Ellsberg. Although the Cubans were unable to get to Ellsberg, the scheme was remarkable as possibly the only time that an American President has ordered his goons to batter a U.S. citizen.

Hunt and Liddy asked a CIA doctor for hallucinatory drugs in order to disable or kill Jack Anderson.

By the spring of 1972 Jack Anderson had become a White House enemy on a par with Ellsberg, because of his relentless coverage of the ITT scandal. Nixon repeatedly asked Charles Colson to discredit or quiet the columnist. On March 14, Colson met with Hunt, who recalls the White House counsel asking him to look into ways of drugging Anderson. Ten days later, Hunt and Liddy met with a former CIA physician in an unsuccessful attempt to obtain hallucinatory drugs. Hunt has since denied published reports that he sought to kill Anderson, but his admitted plan to coat the steering wheel of Anderson's car with a mind-altering drug "for absorption through the palms of the hands" surely amounts to the same thing. It is hardly reassuring that Colson has testified that Hunt *also* met with CIA doctors "in connection with consideration of covert action against Daniel Ellsberg."

Given this pattern to the Plumbers' activities, the White House plot against Torrijos—and the enthusiasm with which anti-Castro activists joined in—must be understood at least in part as a political operation, rather than simply an example of drug enforcement gone wild. The origins of the conspiracy probably have more to do with Torrijos's public image as a radical nationalist, friend of Cuba, and challenger of traditional American "rights" to the Canal Zone, than with his condoning of drug trafficking. It is significant that Hunt and Liddy were both extreme conservatives, close to right-wing interests represented in the Nixon administration by Hunt's White House supervisor Charles Colson. Hunt's Cuban exile friends in particular were becoming alarmed by Torrijos's friendship with Castro.

AS EARLY AS 1969, COLUMNists Drew Pearson and Jack Anderson charged that Omar Torrijos belonged to the Communist party in Panama and that his brother Moises "was sent to Moscow all expenses paid by the Communists." In April 1971, Panamanian and U.S. businessmen complained that Torrijos was installing radical leftists in key cabinet positions and at the University of Panama. Such charges unified conservative forces when, on June 29, 1971, negotiations to transfer sovereignty over the Panama Canal resumed between the United States and Panama, following Torrijos's rejection of an agreement proposed earlier. By late 1971 the *Baltimore Sun* could report, "The United States reportedly is ready to accede sovereignty over the zone to the Panamanian government."

Expectations of a "sellout" mobilized opponents of the treaty. Congressman Daniel Flood (D-Pa.), who has come under federal investigation for wielding influence on behalf of Haiti's dictator Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier—among other things—thundered, "The very moment we surrender sovereignty over the Zone to Panama as presently planned, Soviet power will take over the Republic of Panama as it did Cuba."

On November 15, 1971, Jack Anderson first disclosed Representative John Murphy's (D-N.Y.) plans to have his Panama Canal subcommittee of the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee hold hearings to determine whether the State Department was, in Anderson's words, "selling out U.S. interests in the Panama canal." Less than two weeks later, Anderson published the first of many "leaks" from that subcommittee; he described a briefing by BNDD director John Ingersoll, who held Panama responsible for one-twelfth of all the cocaine and heroin imported into the United States.

Murphy was not just another conservative hoping to dump the treaty: He also happened to be an old friend of Nicaraguan President Anastasio Somoza. In 1977, Murphy came under investigation by the official corruption unit of the U.S. attorney for the southern district of New York, for influence peddling on behalf of the Nicaraguan dictator.

Somoza also had the gratitude of E. Howard Hunt and his Cubans. As Central America's leading foe of communism, Somoza has from the time of the Bay of Pigs invasion encouraged Cuban exile forces to use his country as a launching platform for militant anti-Castro operations throughout Central and South America. Indeed, in September 1976, Somoza personally attended a reunion of the original Bay of Pigs force, Brigade 2506, and promised his continued support.

Somoza had his own compelling reasons to hope for a collapse of the talks with Panama, aside from his ideological interest in frustrating good relations between the populist Panama regime and the United States. In the 1971/72 period Somoza began negotiating with a consortium of billionaire financiers—Howard Hughes (then resident in Nicaragua), Daniel Ludwig, and the Rothschilds—to build a sea-level canal through Nicaragua to take traffic away from the outdated and politically unstable lock canal in Panama. It is surely significant, therefore, that Howard Hunt—according to Artime, who was interviewed by the FBI in June 1972—"expressed his interest in a proposed canal through Nicaragua. . . ." Hunt says he discussed Nicaraguan business deals at an April 1971 Bay of Pigs reunion with Barker and Artime (who was in the meat business with Somoza); FBI records indicate that he did so again with Artime, a year later, by telephone from the

White House.

At the same time, however, plans were underway to build a similar, and cheaper, sea-level canal through Panama itself. The Atlantic-Pacific Interoceanic Canal Study Commission, appointed by President Johnson, reported in 1970 that such a canal was feasible and would probably be needed before the end of the century. Several members of the United States treaty-negotiating team from that era have admitted in recent interviews that the Nixon administration's pursuit of a new treaty was motivated in large part by the hope of winning permission from the Panamanian government for future construction of such a canal.

Congressman Murphy may have had Somoza's interests in mind, therefore, when, over the vigorous objections of the State Department, he used the canal hearings as a platform from which to torpedo the treaty negotiations. As an essential part of that strategy, he seized upon the emotional issue of drugs, airing reports from Customs and BNDD implicating the Panamanian leadership in the narcotics traffic.

Jack Anderson, Murphy's favored media contact, once again was the first to leak the committee's findings, in his March 14, 1972, column that fingered Juan Tack and Moises Torrijos. Murphy followed up the next day with a speech in Congress, accusing the "highest levels" of the Torrijos regime of complicity in the traffic. Murphy also attacked the State Department for turning a blind eye to the drug traffic in its unseemly haste to sign a treaty with Torrijos. (A few months later Jack Anderson reported yet another leak from the Murphy committee, in a column that began: "For the sake of better relations with Panama, the United States has gone soft on Panamanian heroin smugglers.")

Murphy's subcommittee report questioned whether "the United States is negotiating a treaty that involves a 70-year, five-billion-dollar U.S. commitment, not to mention the security of the United States and this hemisphere, with a government that condones or is actually involved in a drug-running operation into the United States." The report concluded unequivocally: "Because of the known involvement of Panamanian government officials in the international narcotics traffic, the U.S. government should take a firm stand in the current negotiations of a new treaty for the continued use of the Panama Canal Zone."

The State Department replied lamely that the Murphy report was "inappropriate." Privately, a member of the treaty negotiating team told Murphy that after weeks of agonizing the State Department had decided that "if it eliminated dialogue with all Latin American governments that might have officials involved in the narcotics traffic, very little dialogue would take place at all." But the anti-treaty forces rallied behind Murphy. Representative Flood rose to denounce "the collaboration of Panama with Cuba and the USSR" and suggested that in narcotics "our agents have uncovered the source of revenue for financing Soviet espionage."

"Pro-Red nationalist" countries, as Flood called them, hardly bore a unique responsibility for the drug traffic. BNDD director John Ingersoll himself admitted before the Murphy committee that "Most of what can be said of the situation [in Panama] is applicable to a number of other Central and South American urban transportation and communication centers as well as key cities in the Caribbean." Indeed, a secret 1972 CIA report on Latin American narcotics cited Murphy's beloved Nicaragua as a "transit point for heroin shipped north from South America via Panama to the United States." It identified Cuban exiles as the middle men for narcotics originating in such anticommunist lands as Argentina, Uruguay, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. In short, the left-wing narcotics conspiracy made good propaganda but was not the primary concern of right-wing critics of Panama.

Murphy damned the administration for ignoring Panama's drug traffic in its haste to sign a new treaty.

SIGNIFICANTLY, HOWEVER, those propaganda charges were echoed by prominent Panamanian exile Arnulfo Arias, whose own dictatorial ambitions rivaled those of General Torrijos. Arias had served as president of Panama for only 11 days when Torrijos overthrew him in 1968. His chief spokesman (and a relative by marriage) was the ardent antitreaty lobbyist Philip Harman, who dedicated himself to ousting Torrijos and to returning Arias to power. In a letter to C. L. Sulzberger of the *New York Times* on April 21, 1972 (placed in the Congressional Record by the ever-helpful Daniel Flood), Harman warned of KGB infiltration in Panama, recited familiar charges against Juan Tack and the Torrijos brothers, and added, "I do know that President Arnulfo Arias, a former physician and now in exile in Miami, is gravely worried over this mounting heroin problem in his country in which 12% of the heroin in the United States stem from Panama." [*sic*]

Arias's oft-expressed outrage at corruption in the Torrijos regime wears thin, however, when his own record is recalled. During an earlier stretch as president of Panama, from 1949 to 1951, Arnulfo and his favorite nephew Antonio "The Druggist" Arias, in collaboration with the secret police, masterminded a huge narcotics and gold smuggling ring that accounted for much of the $2 million that President Arias is said to have made during his 20 months in office. Arias was also accused by opposition leaders—whom he promptly threw in jail—of profiting from illegal business deals with the Somoza family in Nicaragua. And he thought nothing of spending state funds for his own private ventures.

New evidence has come to light that Arias, possibly as just a figurehead, was involved with the White House in efforts to oust Torrijos in 1972. According to a source close to Frank Sturgis, the Room 16 group coordinated its assassination plot with a group of Panamanian exile leaders, including Arnulfo Arias and Colonel Amado Sanjur, who fled Panama in 1970 following an unsuccessful (and, many say, CIA-backed) coup attempt against Torrijos.

A confidential FBI report on "Panamanian Revolutionary Activities," dated September 18, 1972, throws light on this subject. It consists of a lengthy interview with Arias, who made no secret of his hope that Torri-

jos would be "overthrown . . . by a force supported by the United States Government." Arias, the report continued, could not understand "why Torrijos, a dedicated leftist, is allowed to remain in power. If he is allowed to remain, he will be another Fidel Castro, whom he has visited in Cuba already."

Arias denied being "currently" engaged in organizing a force to overthrow Torrijos, but admitted—probably in reference to Barker's "secret army"—that he had "had help offered him from a group of Cubans in Miami." In the meantime, Arias said, he was "encouraging his associates in Panama to do all they can to work against the Torrijos regime."

But the Panamanian exiles persisted, even after Watergate. Representative Murphy early in 1974 disclosed the existence of "not one but two plots currently underway to overthrow the current military dictatorship. One plot involves a military overthrow of General Omar Torrijos—similar to the unsuccessful one that was attempted several years ago [i.e. the December 1969 Sanjur plot]—and the other involves a conspiracy of Panamanian businessmen—who are wooing ex-Panamanian military men in exile—because they are disenchanted with the current economic situation in Panama." Torrijos, he said, was negotiating with Arias in the hope of preventing a coup, but, Murphy concluded, "We simply do not wish to give this vital world waterway over to an unstable government that, aside from dabbling in the narcotics traffic, might be overthrown tomorrow."

The confluence of antitreaty lobbyists, Panamanian exiles, Somoza cronies, and Cuban exiles in plotting the ouster of Torrijos, and their common resort to narcotics charges to undermine State Department negotiations with his regime, all suggest the political motives that lay behind the Plumbers' plan to assassinate Torrijos. The same political instincts that led the White House warriors of Room 16 to suspect Daniel Ellsberg of ties to the Soviets or George McGovern of taking payoffs from Cuba inspired their violent ambitions against General Torrijos. But narcotics meanwhile provided a perfect excuse for the job, for had the Nixon administration not elevated the drive against narcotics to the moral equivalent of war? Assassinations might be immoral in peacetime, but not in war.

Watergate probably saved Panama's leader from death at the hands of the President's hired assassins.

MUCH ABOUT THE TORRIjos plot remains unclear, however. The Watergate special prosecutor's investigation did not resolve any of the remaining questions, according to the attorney who worked on the case, because the conspiracy was "too far afield." "It involved something outside of the United States," he said. "You just don't go after someone for that." But evidence such as the Mexican visa found on Sturgis at the time of the Watergate break-in tends to confirm *Newsweek*'s claim that Hunt actually sent a team into Mexico in connection with the intended assassination. How far the plot had progressed by the time of Watergate, however, remains uncertain.

A wall of silence surrounds the operation at its higher levels. Egil Krogh, Gordon Liddy, and E. Howard Hunt will not talk, and the locus of responsibility within the White House cannot, therefore, be pinned down. It is hard to believe that Hunt would have gone ahead with a plot to kill a foreign leader without higher authorization, although in light of Liddy's propensity to take off-the-cuff remarks as orders, authorization might not have been explicit. If Nixon did approve the operation—and evidence from other Watergate operations suggests that he must have known of it—the question of his motives remains.

Nixon might have sanctioned the elimination of Torrijos simply as part of his "war on drugs." But why Torrijos and not any number of other leaders in Latin America or Southeast Asia? *Le Monde* charged that the destruction of Ricord's Corsican drug network in Latin America—of which the BNDD's Panama campaign was a part—was a result of "close Mafia-police–Narcotics Bureau collaboration," with "proofs furnished obligingly by La Cosa Nostra." According to this bizarre but not impossible theory, it was no mistake that Cuban-Italian organizations, often with ties to the CIA, replaced the old Corsican syndicates.

A more likely theory centers on the fact—confirmed in recent interviews with former senior officials of the State Department and treaty negotiators—that by the spring of 1972 the White House realized that its treaty demands for a 50-year military presence in the Canal Zone and for construction rights to a sea-level canal were encountering serious opposition from the Torrijos government. Indeed, later that year, the general rejected the final, firm U.S. offer. Nixon may well have believed that conservative, Miami-based Panamanian exiles such as Arnulfo Arias and Amado Sanjur would be more sympathetic to U.S. interests and might accept a treaty where Torrijos would not.

Finally, the old anticommunist Nixon has to be considered. Nixon, after all, had been the White House operations officer for Bay of Pigs planning during the Eisenhower administration, and had numerous business and political ties to Cuban exiles associated with his friend Bebe Rebozo. Over the years, Nixon also developed a relationship with prominent Somoza lobbyists, who threw powerful political support his way during the 1960 campaign. And one of his biggest backers, Howard Hughes, was negotiating business deals with Somoza in 1971 and 1972. Nixon may well have shared the concern of such constituencies that Torrijos would stir up radicalism in Central America and the Caribbean.

The White House war against Torrijos was curtailed only by a setback on another battle front: Watergate. The capture of Hunt and his burglars pushed Nixon into a hasty cover-up of the crimes that Hunt and Liddy had committed on his behalf—up to and including assassination plots. Torrijos, at last, gained a little more room to maneuver. His troubles were not over: The canal lobby remained as vigorous as ever (as he would see in 1977), and militant Panamanian and Cuban exiles continued their raids against property of his regime. But no longer were the hired guns of the President of the United States out for his life. ■