

ARTICLE 1
ON 10-1-80

HUMAN EVENTS
26 January 1985

Finally, the Truth About 'Watergate'?

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The possibility of CIA involvement in the Watergate affair is not a new idea. Sen. Howard Baker touched on it in his Ervin Committee minority report. Minority Counsel Fred Thompson and H. R. Haldeman raised the possibility to a probability in their books on Watergate. But the nature of such CIA involvement remained murky.

Now comes Jim Hougan, the Washington editor of *Harper's* with *Secret Agenda: Watergate, Deep Throat and the CIA*,* a book that is both startling and persuasive.

His case is largely circumstantial and based upon inference and it might not stand up in a court of law. After all, much of the evidence was immediately destroyed, Nixon being just about the only person involved who did not resort to destroying his tapes. But Mr. Hougan has built a formidable case nevertheless.

He has thrown a whole new light on Watergate. He is also a virtual Balzac of the raunchier aspects of Washington life, the sex both straight and kinky, the multiple spy rings both government and private, the pervasive corruption.

Until Hougan, the reason for the Watergate break-in, or break-ins, has never been very clear. To the question of why anyone would want to bug Larry O'Brien or the Democratic National Committee, the answer was never very clear.

It has been vaguely assumed that Liddy, Hunt and the rest were after "political intelligence," or perhaps after something linking Nixon to Howard Hughes, or maybe evidence of a connection of some sort between the

Democrats and Fidel Castro.

Nothing like that. According to Hougan, Hunt and James McCord never really retired from the CIA, which continued to provide them with a broad range of "institutional support." The offices of the Democratic Committee were never bugged. The CIA, however, was interested in a call-girl ring operating out of the Columbia Plaza Hotel, and bugged its phones. This call-girl ring had many important clients from both political parties, foreign political figures including Koreans, and so forth.

Just why the CIA was interested in all of this sexual activity is not altogether clear, though one section of the CIA was involved in constructing "psychological profiles" of important people. Presumably these profiles would allow the agency to estimate or predict modes of political behavior. Who knows? They could even be used for blackmail purposes.

According to Hougan, the positions in the White House of McCord and Hunt were a cover for their more fundamental CIA activities.

In the offices of the Democratic National Committee at the Watergate there was a private telephone that did not go through the regular switchboard. In Hougan's account, this was in the office of an official named Spencer Oliver, whose duties frequently drew him out of town. In his absence, this phone was used to contact the call-girl ring at the Columbia Plaza, for the purpose of providing entertainment for Democratic politicians, visiting dignitaries, and so forth. The CIA buggers picked up this traffic.

By coincidence, the Nixon White House became alarmed during the summer of 1972 that some of its employees might be involved in scandalous sexual activities.

On July 9, the *Washington Star* carried a story about a "Capitol Hill Call-Girl Ring" in connection with which arrests had been made. The White House was able to view much of the evidence, including address books.

One female White House attorney had posed for sexually explicit photographs, and was fired. It was an election year, and the White House wondered whether the Democrats were in a position to spring a sex scandal on the "Silent Majority." Jeb Magruder ordered Gordon Liddy to find out what, if anything, was in O'Brien's files at the DNC.

As it turned out, this White House political operation ran head-on into the ongoing CIA intelligence operation regarding the girls at the Columbia Plaza Hotel. The CIA operation was highly sensitive, at the very least, and probably illegal.

In Hougan's account, the decision was made to subvert the White House operation in order to protect the CIA cover. Gordon Liddy, he believes, was essentially the fall guy in an operation deliberately blown by Hunt and McCord. The entire break-in was, deliberately, a Marx-brothers comedy of errors, including evidence planted that would link the break-in directly to the White House.

The CIA had little affection for the Nixon Administration. Its establishment was furious that Director Richard Helms was being replaced and reassigned to Teheran. But the CIA could not anticipate the disastrous "coverup" that would eventually burst into the headlines and bring Nixon down.

Hougan shows convincingly that both the Democrats on the Ervin Committee and the media, notably Woodward and Bernstein, had powerful motives for ignoring the pervasive CIA presence.

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The Democrats wanted to keep the focus on the misdeeds of the hated Nixon, and not complicate matters by making Nixon look, at least in part, like the victim of a larger plot. The CIA was very useful to Woodward and Bernstein, feeding them information that was useful in their Watergate coverage, but steering them away from the sensitive areas. Hougan believes that part of the tacit bargain was that Woodward would leave the CIA out of it.

Other dark corners in this affair include the sudden deaths, by "heart attack," of a couple of key witnesses just before they were to testify. One of them believed that a prescription had been tampered with.