

A MILITARY 'RING' LINKED TO SPYING ON WHITE HOUSE

Plumbers Reportedly Found Plot to Inform Pentagon of Secret China Talks

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Jan. 11—The White House investigative unit known as the plumbers uncovered evidence in late 1971 that a "ring" of military officers was attempting to relay highly classified information on the China talks and other matters to officials in the Pentagon, well-informed sources report.

Some of the officers were assigned to the National Security Council.

The secret inquiry, headed by David R. Young Jr., then a co-director of the plumbers, was said to have determined that at least two military officers had participated in apparently illegal activities—including the ransacking of classified files and the unauthorized photocopying of documents—in an apparent attempt to keep high Pentagon officials up-to-date on White House negotiations.

Six Men Reassigned

Although no charges were filed formally, the sources added, as many as six military men were reassigned.

Sources said that Mr. Young's inquiry was initially begun in response to the December, 1971, publication of secret National Security Council documents on the India-Pakistan war by Jack Anderson, the columnist, but quickly spread into a broad investigation of possible widespread military spying.

It was this investigation, reliable sources said, that has been repeatedly cited by President Nixon as the "national security" matter that justified his initial attempt last spring to limit the Justice Department's investigation of the plumbers.

Suspicious Cited

The sources said that Mr. Young and Henry A. Kissinger, now the Secretary of State and then head of the National Security Council, suspected that reports on the White House's negotiations with China, North Vietnam and the Soviet Union were being leaked to Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird and Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Details of the negotiations were officially limited to a few officials in the White House and the National Security Council's staff.

The National Security Council investigation, which lasted until 1972, sources said, was conducted primarily by Mr. Young. The three other members of the plumbers — Egil Krogh Jr., G. Gordon Liddy and

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E. Howard Hunt Jr.—did little or had no roles in the inquiry.

All sources interviewed by The Times agreed that Mr. Kissinger shared Mr. Young's belief that Pentagon officials were eager to obtain—by covert methods if necessary—details of the White House's far-reaching secret deliberations with nations usually considered America's enemies by military men.

"Laird had a definite feeling that he was being cut off from a lot of stuff, and I know it's true," one former Kissinger aide said.

The highest ranking officer reassigned, sources said, was Rear Adm. Robert O. Welander, who was then serving as the liaison officer between the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Security Council.

Neither Admiral Welander nor Mr. Laird, now a White House aide, could be reached today, but Admiral Moorer denounced the allegation that he had received classified information through indirect channels as "ludicrous."

During Mr. Young's investigation, sources said, he was ordered to report periodically to Gen. Alexander M. Haig Jr., then Mr. Kissinger's key deputy in the National Security Council and now the White House chief of staff. This was the first indication that Mr. Young, a former aide to Mr. Kissinger, maintained a professional relationship with the council while serving with the plumbers. Mr. Kissinger had repeatedly denied any knowledge of the plumbers' activities.

In a statement issued today from Mr. Nixon's home in San Clemente, Calif., the White House said that the published news accounts "convey an incorrect impression of the knowledge and actions of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; that the matter was investigated at the time; that the source of these leaks was a low-level employe whose clerical tasks gave him access to highly classified information, and that today's news stories are based on fragmentary accounts of the incident."

An account of the secret White House investigation was initially published today by The Chicago Tribune, which said that the case was the "mysterious" national security matter so often cited by President Nixon to justify his decision to set up the plumbers in mid-1971.

A New York Times investigation, however, had previously established that there was a wide diversity of opinion among high-level White House aides over the significance and accuracy of the plumbers' findings and the whole investigation's relevance to national security.

One group, while acknowledging that some military men assigned to the National Security Council had copied documents to which they did not formally have access, described the incident as "just plain in-house rinky-dink stuff" and said that no link had been made between the officers and any public dissemination of classified papers, including the India-Pakistan documents.

Another Viewpoint

Another group, which includes some of Mr. Young's former colleagues and personal acquaintances, said that the plumbers "really did uncover a ring of some sort inside the N.S.C." One source said that one of the military men working in the council was "actually going through other people's files."

The sources all agreed, however, that Mr. Young's inquiry into possible wrongdoing inside the Security Council did not begin until late 1971, after the publication of the Anderson papers, and could not have been involved, as reported, in Mr. Nixon's decision to set up the plumbers unit six months earlier.

The Times investigation also determined that those few officials who were apprised of the National Security Council inquiry were divided about the propriety of keeping it secret.

For example, details of the plumbers inquiry were provided at a secret briefing last summer to Senator Sam J. Ervin Jr., Democrat of North Carolina, and Howard H. Baker Jr., Republican of Tennessee. The two ranking members of the Senate Watergate committee reportedly agreed subsequently to keep the information secret, although Mr. Baker said publicly at the time that he was doing so only at the specific request of the White House.

Had Other Roles, Too

Some White House advisers had reportedly urged that details of the N.S.C. inquiry be made public last year, apparently to buttress the White House's contention that significant national security issues were at stake in the plumbers activities. But the advocates of disclosure were overruled by a faction headed by J. Fred Buzhardt Jr., the White House counsel, who was then deeply involved in Watergate matters.

But it was Mr. Buzhardt, sources said, who was also responsible for coordinating the Pentagon's activities in connection with the plumbers investigation in late 1971. At that time, Mr. Buzhardt was the general counsel of the Department of Defense.

White House and Justice Department officials who have been fully apprised of the

plumbers inquiry agreed in interviews, however, that the questions about the military's activities inside the National Security Council needed to be explored in public.

One clue to the incompleteness of the plumbers inquiry was provided by President Nixon at a news conference on Feb. 10, 1972, three months after publication of the India-Pakistan papers by Mr. Anderson.

"We have a lot of circumstantial evidence" on the identity of Mr. Anderson's source, the President said, adding, "As a lawyer, I can say that we do not have evidence that I consider adequate or the Attorney General considers adequate to take to court."

"You can be sure that the investigation is continuing," Mr. Nixon said. "If the investigation gets a break which provides the kind of evidence which will stand up in court, we will present it. But we cannot go to court on circumstantial evidence."

Five days later, Mr. Anderson publicly declared that the White House, in effect had punished the wrong man by "banishing" Admiral Welander from his Joint Chiefs of Staff position to sea duty. "I never talked to Welander," Mr. Anderson said. "He gave me nothing."

Admiral Welander was later reassigned to the Pentagon, and is now serving as assistant deputy chief of naval operations for plans and policy.

"What we need to know," one source said, "are answers to the following: To what extent was it a Pentagon scheme? And who was behind it?"

If some of the allegations about military conduct eventually prove to be true, this official added, "then we had the rudiments of the kind of thing that leads to a military takeover."