

*Dirty Tricks*  
*Nixon, Watergate, and the CIA*

Shane O'Sullivan<sup>1</sup>

New York: Skyhorse Books, 2018; £20.00 h/b; 536 pages, notes, index

**Robin Ramsay**

**S**o what can a major reappraisal of Watergate tell us in 2018 that we didn't know before? Surprisingly little about the major events. But this isn't the fault of the author, who has done a huge amount of work with the extant literature and many new sources.

O'Sullivan begins in 1968 and the election which brought Nixon to power. With Robert Kennedy assassinated and sitting President Johnson having announced he wouldn't run again, the Democratic Party's presidential candidate was Hubert Humphrey. To bolster Humphrey's chances, LBJ tried to organise a temporary halt to the Vietnam War before the election. The Nixon team heard about this and set about frustrating it. Through Anna Chennault, a long-time member of the China Lobby on the right of the Republican Party, the Nixon team got word to the South Vietnamese, who were part of the peace talks at the time. 'Drag your feet', they were told. This was duly done and Nixon narrowly won the election.<sup>2</sup>

LBJ knew what Madam Chennault and the Nixon team were doing but decided not to blow the whistle during the election campaign – possibly because the main source on this was NSA intercepts which he didn't want to reveal. Although we have known about this in outline for a while, Sullivan recounts these events in enormous detail in the first two chapters.<sup>3</sup>

Nixon believed that papers about those events leading up the 1968 election were held in the Brookings Institute in Washington, a bastion of (relatively) liberal thinking on foreign affairs. Nixon wanted Brookings burgled and the papers stolen. Nixon set the tone for 'the plumbers', the off-the-books

---

<sup>1</sup> Author interview at <<https://tinyurl.com/yb5cskmp>> or <<https://whowhatwhy.org/2018/11/30/watergate-dirty-tricks-an-october-surprise-and-the-cia/>>.

<sup>2</sup> Having helped get Nixon elected and raised a large amount of money for the Republicans, Madame Chennault was swiftly dumped by them.

<sup>3</sup> But did we really need 65 pages on this? Half way through them I began to skim . . . .

It is nostalgic to read how difficult it was to run such an operation without instant, mobile communications between the parties. Lots of memos written, notes of phone-calls – the paper trail for a historian like the author. What would there be these days? Emails and texts, maybe.

unit established in the White House ostensibly to investigate and prevent leaks of information: anything goes.

There was a pool of ex-CIA, ex-military and ex-FBI people in Washington looking to supplement their pensions. The Nixon team didn't know much about this world and picked people on the say-so of others. Thus James McCord and Hunt, two senior ex-CIA officers, joined ex-FBI Gordon Liddy in 'the plumbers'.<sup>4</sup>

The author can't quite demonstrate that Hunt, and/or McCord, and/or Eugenio Martinez (a CIA contract agent, also in 'the plumbers'), told the CIA what they were doing out of the White House basement. But it would be a surprise if none of them did. This is the 'CIA trap' theory, which at its heart says no-one is ever really 'ex'-CIA and loyalty to the Agency remains paramount. That theory in its simplest form:

'. . . former CIA officer Miles Copeland published a provocative article in William Buckley's *National Review*. . . Under the subheading "A Set-Up?" Copeland asked:

"So how did one fine operator like McCord get himself involved in the Watergate mess? Do you know how long it takes for a CIA-trained operator to get into an office like the one in Watergate, install a microphone, and get the hell out? It takes less than one minute, and it requires a team of exactly two persons, the operator and a lookout. But at Watergate, Jim McCord, who had undergone the training and knew the procedure, had entered the Democratic offices with Abbott, Costello, the four Marx brothers, and the Keystone Cops, and had horsed around for almost half an hour without a lookout."

When Copeland asked former colleagues at Langley, "What *really* happened at Watergate?" their reaction convinced him that "with or without explicit instructions from someone in the Agency, McCord took Hunt and Liddy into a trap." He argued CIA specialists in "dirty tricks" "had a lot to gain from putting the White House's clowns out of business." (p. 315)

Which again raises the question: what *were* they doing in the Democratic National Committee office? This is what Richard Nixon asked when he was told of the arrests. For he knew that the DNC was not exactly where the political

---

<sup>4</sup> Did we need the 22 pages the author devotes to Hunt's biography? In it we learn a great deal about Hunt's espionage novels and the fact that Hunt took the job with the White House because he needed to pay hospital bills for a daughter with a long-term and expensive medical condition.

action was.<sup>5</sup> The conventional account is that they were trying to bug the phone of DNC chair Larry O'Brien. The author quotes journalist Jack Anderson:

' . . . on an earlier visit to the November Group<sup>6</sup> office in New York to "sweep their telephones for bugs," McCord "let slip that his next assignment was to bug [Larry] O'Brien's office." "We tap them, they tap us, it's routine," he said.' (p. 188)

It is surprising that a former senior CIA officer, whose speciality had been security, let something like this 'slip'. More support for the Copeland thesis quoted above, perhaps. But the author shows that at least one other member of the private spook subculture knew 'the plumbers' were going into the DNC. However, since McCord and Hunt are dead and Martinez, though alive, won't talk, we may never know if the operation was leaky on purpose. But leaky it was.

Was O'Brien the target? The author quotes one of the policemen who investigated the incident as saying that there were no bugs in O'Brien's phones. Probably there were several targets. O'Brien was apparently one – not least because of his connections to Howard Hughes, from whom Nixon had taken money in the past. The author explores in detail but ultimately rejects the theory – associated initially with Jim Hougan<sup>7</sup> – that the Republicans were looking for sexual dirt. Instead he returns to one of the secondary questions: why did they tap the phone of Spencer Oliver, an apparently minor Democratic Party official? Was it, as some have suggested, because Oliver's mostly unused phone was used by Democratic Party officials to book hookers? Probably not, he concludes. On the other hand, Oliver was coordinating an attempt within the Democratic Party organisation to block the nomination of Senator George

---

<sup>5</sup> In his memoirs Nixon wrote: 'Anyone who knew anything about politics would know that a national committee headquarters was a useless place to go for inside information on a presidential campaign. The whole thing was so senseless and bungled that it almost looked like some kind of a setup.' Quoted at <<https://whowhatwhy.org/2017/06/17/watergate-downing-nixon-part-1/>>.

<sup>6</sup> Nixon's 'personal advertising agency'.

<sup>7</sup> Hougan's work in *Secret Agenda* was elaborated a little by Len Colodny and Robert Gettling in their *Silent Coup* (reviewed in *Lobster* 26) and a bit more in Phil Stanford's *White House Call Girl* (reviewed in *Lobster* 68 at <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster68/lob68-white-house.pdf>>).

The one item the author missed – or omitted, perhaps, because he considered it not reliable – is the account by the Washington police informant of the period, Robert Merritt, in his *Watergate Exposed* (reviewed in *Lobster* 62 at <<https://tinyurl.com/y9u4zscs>> or <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster62/lob62-watergate.pdf>>).

Jim Hougan discusses Merritt's fascinating story at <<http://jimhougan.com/wordpress/>>.

McGovern as the party's presidential candidate in 1972: they knew McGovern would lose. For this reason McGovern was the Democratic Party opponent Richard Nixon wanted. So, this theory goes, they tapped Oliver's phone to try and keep track of the internal machinations against McGovern.

'This was precisely what Baldwin had told the FBI in his second interview: "all political conversations monitored were related to the policy of getting rid of McGovern.'" <sup>8</sup>

Presidential politics starts with winning the election. The Spencer Oliver-McGovern thesis is extremely plausible but – despite the author's impressive efforts – we cannot be more certain than that.

---

<sup>8</sup> p. 392 Alfred Baldwin was in a room across from the Watergate building taping/transcribing what the bugs picked up.