

Egil Krogh, Who Authorized an Infamous Break-In, Dies at 80

He regretted his role in the burglary of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office and said he thought it had set the stage for Watergate.



By Neil Genzlinger

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Egil Krogh, who as part of President Richard M. Nixon's staff was one of the leaders of the secret "Plumbers" unit that broke into the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist, a prelude to the Watergate burglary that brought down the Nixon presidency, died on Saturday in Washington. He was 80.

His son Peter said the cause was heart failure.

In November 1973, Mr. Krogh, known as Bud, pleaded guilty to "conspiracy against rights of citizens" for his role in the September 1971 break-in at the office of Dr. Lewis Fielding in Beverly Hills, Calif.

The Plumbers, a group of White House operatives, were tasked with plugging leaks of confidential material, which had bedeviled the Nixon administration. Mr. Ellsberg, a military analyst, had been responsible for the biggest leak of all: passing the Pentagon Papers, the top-secret government history of the Vietnam War, to The New York Times earlier that year.

The Plumbers were hoping to get information about Mr. Ellsberg's mental state that would discredit him, but they found nothing of importance related to him.

"We believed then that these leaks constituted a national security crisis and needed to be plugged at all costs," Mr. Krogh wrote in a 2007 memoir, "Integrity: Good People, Bad Choices and Life Lessons From the White House," written with his son Matthew. "But we were wrong, and the price paid by the country was too high."

Before his involvement with the Plumbers, Mr. Krogh, a lawyer and Navy veteran, was regarded as upstanding and reliable — "the White House Mr. Clean," Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward called him in "All the President's Men." And after taking responsibility for his mistakes and serving four and a half months in prison, he rebuilt his reputation, resuming his law practice and speaking and writing on ethics.

In 2007, to mark the 35th anniversary of the Watergate break-in (in which he played no part), Mr. Krogh wrote an essay for The Times about the Fielding break-in, which he believed had established the mind-set for Watergate.

"The premise of our action was the strongly held view within certain precincts of the White House that the president and those functioning on his behalf could carry out illegal acts with impunity if they were convinced that the nation's security demanded it," he wrote. "As President Nixon himself said to David Frost during an interview six years later, 'When the president does it, that means it is not illegal.' To this day the implications of this statement are staggering."

Egil Krogh Jr. (the first name is pronounced EH-gil; the last name rhymes with "vogue") was born on Aug. 3, 1939, in Chicago. His father was a businessman, and his mother, Josephine (Wooling) Krogh, was a homemaker.

He grew up in Chicago, Seattle and St. Louis, and earned a bachelor's degree in 1961 at Principia College in Illinois. After three years in the Navy, he earned a law degree at the University of Washington in 1968.

He went on to work for a Seattle law firm in which John Ehrlichman, a family friend, was a partner. When Nixon was elected in 1968, Mr. Ehrlichman became White House counsel and brought Mr. Krogh onto the transition team. Mr. Krogh and another lawyer, Ed Morgan, were given the job of vetting nominees for cabinet and other posts in the new administration.

Mr. Krogh then coordinated the administration's drug initiatives, paying particular attention to drug use among the troops in Vietnam and the flow of heroin and other narcotics into the United States. In 1971 Mr. Ehrlichman asked him to tackle another problem: leaks like the Pentagon Papers. He and David Young, an aide to Henry A. Kissinger, Nixon's national security adviser, were to lead the Plumbers unit.

"I felt deep loyalty to John Ehrlichman," Mr. Krogh wrote in his memoir, explaining why he agreed to the new assignment. "My being in the White House was in part based on 15 years of friendship between the Ehrlichman and Krogh families."

In August 1971, he attended a meeting at which E. Howard Hunt, later convicted in the Watergate scandal, suggested burglarizing Dr. Fielding's office.

"At no time did I or anyone else there question whether the operation was necessary, legal or moral," Mr. Krogh wrote in his 2007 Times essay. "Convinced that we were responding legitimately to a national security crisis, we focused instead on the operational details: who would do what, when and where."

Several other people were also charged in the Fielding burglary, including Mr. Ehrlichman, whose sentence on various charges was made concurrent with his sentence for conspiracy, obstruction and perjury in the Watergate case. Though the Fielding burglary turned up little about Mr. Ellsberg, Mr. Krogh believed it led directly to Watergate.

"The burglary set a precedent that two members of the Plumbers could rely on when planning and executing the Watergate break-in of 1972," he wrote. "They knew that under certain circumstances the White House staff would tolerate an illegal act to obtain information."

By then he was no longer part of the Plumbers; he had been removed from the team in late 1971 after objecting to a proposed wiretap related to a different leak. He was later named an under secretary of transportation, but resigned from that post in 1973 as the legal case against him was building.

He was the first member of the president's staff to receive a prison sentence; he was given two to six years but was released after four and a half months.

Mr. Krogh was disbarred in 1975 but was readmitted to the bar in 1980. Thereafter he concentrated on issues and clients related to energy.

Mr. Krogh's three marriages, to Suzanne Francis Lowell in 1963, Laura Lee Carkener in 1978 and Ann Horton in 1992, ended in divorce. In addition to his sons Peter and Matthew, from his first marriage, he is survived by his partner, Nancy Glenn Hansen; a son from his third marriage, James; a stepdaughter from his second marriage, Laura Dail; two sisters, Letitia Krogh Davis and Joegil Krogh Lundquist; and five grandchildren.

Mr. Krogh liked to tell the story of Dec. 21, 1970: the surreal day that, with Mr. Krogh's considerable help, Elvis Presley met Richard Nixon in the Oval Office. Presley was in Washington and seemed to think he could help with the war on drugs. He sought a meeting with the president, and Mr. Krogh made it happen, standing witness as Presley hugged Nixon, talked about playing Las Vegas, prodded the president to produce some gifts for his bodyguards and, famously, asked for and received an honorary drug agent badge.

Mr. Krogh wrote a book about the moment, “The Day Elvis Met Nixon” (1994). In a 2007 speech at the Nixon library in California, he called it “the one completely fun day I had on the White House staff.”