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Gordon Liddy, undercover operative convicted in Watergate scandal, dies at 90

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Watergate mastermind G. Gordon Liddy answers reporters' questions as members of his family stand behind him in Washington, shortly after his release from federal prison in 1977. (Bob Daugherty/AP)

By **Michael Dobbs**

March 30, 2021 at 11:39 p.m. UTC

G. Gordon Liddy, the undercover operative whose bungling of the Watergate break-in triggered one of the gravest constitutional crises in American history and led to the resignation of President Richard M. Nixon, died March 30 at his daughter's home in Fairfax County, Va. He was 90.

His son Thomas P. Liddy confirmed the death but did not give a cause, saying only that it was unrelated to covid-19.

A theatrical personality whose event-filled career included more twists and turns than a fictional potboiler, Mr. Liddy was at various times an FBI agent, jailbird, radio talk-show host, best-selling author, candidate for Congress, actor and promoter of gold investments.

The role for which he is best remembered was in the plot to bug the Democratic Party headquarters in the Watergate complex in June 1972.

AD

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1 He said he was

Mr. Liddy's combination of can-do ruthlessness, loyalty to Nixon and ends-justify-the-means philosophy made him a natural fit in a White House determined to get even with its political enemies.

At the same time, he was viewed by his superiors as "a little nuts," in Nixon's phrase. "I mean, he just isn't well screwed on, is he?" the president complained to chief of staff H.R. Haldeman a week after the break-in.

With his intense stare, cannonball head, bristling mustache and machine-gun style of speaking, Mr. Liddy looked like the archetypal bad guys he later depicted in television shows including "Miami Vice." His friend and fellow Watergate conspirator, the late E. Howard Hunt, described him as "a wired, wisecracking extrovert who seemed as if he might be a candidate for decaffeinated coffee."

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Mr. Liddy often boasted of his transformation "from a puny, fearful boy to a strong, fearless man" through a regime of intense exercise and physical bravado such as eating rats and holding his hand over a candle until the flesh burned.

1
— going to watch cartoons. Instead, he opened his dad's gun safe.

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colleagues to connect the break-in to the White House and ultimately to a small circle of aides around Nixon himself.

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He accepted personal responsibility for the fiasco, declaring that he was “the captain of the ship when she hit the reef.”

“If someone wants to shoot me, just tell me what corner to stand on, and I will be there,” he told presidential counsel John Dean.

Detractors viewed the gun-loving, hippy-hating Liddy as a threat to American democracy and the man responsible for many of the so-called dirty tricks of the Nixon administration that led to the resignation of the president on Aug. 9, 1974. Supporters admired his war against “radicals” and “subversives” and his refusal to betray his fellow Watergate

The director of the nonprofit National Security Archive, Tom Blanton, said Mr. Liddy “brought out the worst” in Nixon and his aides, “raising the testosterone level in the White House and ratcheting them up to even more extreme action.”

Desperate to contain the scandal during the run-up to the 1972 election, Nixon’s aides launched a coverup with the personal approval and involvement of the president. Mr. Liddy refused to cooperate with prosecutors and Congress, and was sentenced in March 1973 to a 20-year prison term for conspiracy, burglary and illegal wiretapping. President Jimmy Carter commuted Liddy’s sentence in 1977 and he was released after 52 months behind bars.

Public domain content from the Liddy of the Watergate scandal in ...

After graduating from Jesuit-run Fordham University in 1952, Mr. Liddy spent two years in the Army as an artillery officer, but was exempted from service in Korea for medical reasons. He returned to Fordham to study law, completed his degree and joined the FBI in 1957.

That same year, he married a computer instructor named Frances Purcell,

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