

Obituaries

Watergate conspirator James McCord Jr. died two years ago. His death was never announced.

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James W. McCord Jr., a retired CIA employee who was convicted as a conspirator in the Watergate burglary and later linked the 1972 break-in to the White House in revelations that helped end the presidency of Richard M. Nixon, died June 15, 2017, at his home in Douglassville, Pa. He was 93.

The cause was pancreatic cancer, according to his death certificate obtained at the Berks County Register of Wills office in Reading, Pa.

Mr. McCord's death was first reported in "[Dirty Tricks](#)," a 2018 history of the Watergate investigation by filmmaker [Shane O'Sullivan](#). But the news did not appear in local or national media outlets and surfaced online only in March, when the [website Kennedys and King](#) published an obituary referencing his gravesite in Pennsylvania.

Mr. McCord served in the CIA for 19 years, including as chief of the agency's physical security division, before his supporting, at times sensational role in the events that precipitated the first resignation in history of a U.S. president.

He had retired from the spy agency and was privately employed as head of security for the Committee for the Re-Election of the President — commonly called CREEP — when he became entangled in a scheme to burglarize and bug the Democratic national headquarters at the Watergate building in Washington.

Mr. McCord had once taught a college course on how to protect buildings from intrusions, and he helped lead the operation. Preparing for the break-in, the conspirators rigged door latches at the Watergate complex with adhesive tape to prevent the doors from locking.

The tape caught the attention of a security guard, [Frank Wills](#), who alerted the police to suspicious activity in the building. In the early-morning hours of June 17, 1972, plainclothes officers entered the Democratic headquarters and found five burglars clad in suits and surgical gloves.

Those men — Mr. McCord, [Bernard L. Barker](#), Frank A. Sturgis, Eugenio R. Martinez and Virgilio R. Gonzalez — were carrying bugging devices, cameras, film and a walkie-talkie. Mr. McCord initially used the alias Edward Martin but was quickly connected to the reelection committee.

His arraignment, covered by Washington Post reporter Bob Woodward for one of the newspaper's first articles about the events now collectively known as the Watergate scandal, was memorably dramatized in the 1976 film "All the President's Men."

Portrayed by actor Richard Herd, Mr. McCord is asked by a court official about his previous line of government work. "C-I-A," he whispers, in an early hint that the break-in was more than a "third-rate burglary attempt," as White House spokesman Ronald L. Ziegler dismissively described it.

In September 1972, a federal grand jury indicted Mr. McCord, the other burglars, and Nixon aides [E. Howard Hunt](#) and G. Gordon Liddy on charges stemming from the bugging attempt. Hunt and four burglars pleaded guilty. Mr. McCord and Liddy were tried in January 1973 and [convicted](#) of conspiracy, burglary and bugging.

[John J. Sirica](#), the federal judge who presided over the Watergate cases, controversially threatened defendants with stiff sentences if they did not assist investigators. Facing a possible 45 years in prison, Mr. McCord submitted to Sirica a letter that The Post described years later as a "bombshell."

"There was political pressure applied to the defendants to plead guilty and remain silent," Mr. McCord wrote in the March 1973 document, delivered to the court after his conviction and before his sentencing. "Perjury occurred during the trial in matters highly material to the very structure, orientation, and impact of the government's case, and to the motivation and intent of the defendants."

He further wrote that "others involved in the Watergate operation were not identified during the trial, when they could have been by those testifying."

Days later, Mr. McCord appeared before the Senate Watergate committee and testified that Liddy had told him [John N. Mitchell](#), the reelection committee chairman and former U.S. attorney general, had approved the bugging scheme. Mr. McCord further said he had been informed that White House counsel John W. Dean III and Nixon aide [Jeb Stuart Magruder](#) knew in advance of the plan.

Mr. McCord continued to deliver allegations of misconduct at high levels. In a May 1973 memorandum to Senate and other investigators, he wrote that he and the other burglars were pressured to falsely testify that the Watergate scheme was executed at the behest of the CIA — an account that would have exculpated the reelection committee and one that he refused to give.

"Even if it meant my freedom, I would not turn on the organization that had employed me for 19 years," he wrote. "I was completely convinced that the White House was behind the idea and ploy which had been presented, and that the White House was turning ruthless."

Mr. McCord also testified that [John J. Caulfield](#), a Nixon administration official, relayed an offer for clemency and a future job if Mr. McCord agreed not to testify against Nixon officials and to accept a prison sentence.

Mr. McCord's statements, some of them made in closed-door Senate sessions and reported by the media, were credited with helping to break open the Watergate investigation by connecting the burglary to high-ranking

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Nixon officials.

[Nixon resigned](#) on Aug. 9, 1974. Mr. McCord served four months in prison.

“I have no regrets in telling the truth,” he said when he reported to the penitentiary in March 1975. “I think in the long run it’s been extremely beneficial to the country to have become aware of what occurred. I was probably the first to tell the truth on Watergate.”

James Walter McCord Jr. was born in Waurika, Okla., on Jan. 26, 1924. He was a second lieutenant in the Army Air Forces, serving as a bombardier during World War II, and graduated in 1949 with a bachelor’s degree in business administration from the University of Texas. He was an FBI special agent before joining the CIA in 1951, and in 1965, he received a master’s degree in international affairs from George Washington University.

After retiring from the agency, which bestowed on him an award for distinguished service, he ran a security consulting firm in Rockville, Md. In subsequent years, he worked in Colorado for a company that promoted alternative energy.

His wife, Sarah Berry McCord, died in 2014. He had three children, but a complete list of survivors was not available. Calls seeking comment from his family were not immediately returned.

In 1974, Mr. McCord self-published a book, [“A Piece of Tape — The Watergate Story: Fact and Fiction,”](#) that discussed at least one scenario of events that might have been.

Shortly before the Watergate break-in, Mr. McCord wrote, the burglars considered calling off the plan when they discovered that someone had noticed and removed the adhesive tape they placed on the door latches. Rather than aborting the operation, they rigged the locks again.

It was Wills, the \$80-a-week security guard, who spotted the tape the first time. He did not overlook it the second.

Morgan reported from Reading.


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