

# Robert Strauss's Watergate Secret

**Special Report:** Robert Strauss, who died Wednesday, was a Democratic powerbroker who thrived in the age of Nixon, Reagan and Bush-41. But an enduring Watergate mystery is whether Strauss earned his GOP spurs by secretly helping the Republicans in the spy scandal, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Longtime Washington powerbroker Robert Strauss, who died Wednesday at the age of 95, took to the grave the answer to one of the most provocative Watergate mysteries, whether he was, in effect, a Republican mole serving in the highest ranks of the Democratic Party.

In his later years, Strauss rebuffed my requests for an interview on this topic, but it never seemed likely that he would tell the full truth anyway, answering questions about whether his close collaboration with senior Republicans in the early 1970s was just personal or whether he was privately helping them undermine Democratic election prospects in 1972 and then trying to shut down the Watergate investigation in 1973-74.

The mystery surrounding Strauss relates to whether his political allegiance to former Texas Gov. John Connally, who deserted the Democratic Party to work for President Richard Nixon, compromised Strauss's own Democratic loyalty, even as he served as party treasurer and then party chairman after Nixon's landslide reelection in 1972.

There is even suspicion that Strauss may have played an active role in the Watergate scandal by, perhaps unwittingly, helping the Republicans make use of secrets gleaned from a wiretap that the Watergate burglars had placed on the phone of Democratic operative R. Spencer Oliver in late May 1972.

It has never been fully explained exactly what the Republicans got from their wiretap on Oliver's phone, but Oliver told me in an interview in 2004 that he and other Democrats were using that phone to keep track of the delegate count as the Democratic presidential race reached its conclusion in June 1972.

Oliver and other mainstream Democrats operating out of his Watergate office were looking for ways to block the nomination of Sen. George McGovern for fear that the staunchly anti-war candidate would lead the party to catastrophe in November, just the result that President Nixon was hoping for.

So, while Oliver and his allies were strategizing about a possible compromise candidate who would fare better against Nixon, the Republicans were listening in

on those plans, which involved the necessity of shutting McGovern out of delegates in the Texas convention in June.

Though the details of the so-called Gemstone wiretaps have never been revealed, one of the Nixon operatives, Alfred Baldwin, said he transcribed about 200 calls, including some dealing with "political strategy," and passed the transcripts on to James McCord, a former CIA officer and security chief for the Committee to Reelect the President (CREEP). McCord gave the transcripts to G. Gordon Liddy, a former FBI agent who had devised the spying plan.

The intercepts then went to Jeb Stuart Magruder, CREEP's deputy chairman who said he gave the material to former Attorney General John Mitchell, who had left the Justice Department to run CREEP.

Oliver, who was working for the Democratic state chairmen, told me that they commissioned a hard count of delegates to see whether McGovern's nomination could be stopped.

Though knocked from contention in the early primaries, Sen. Edmund Muskie of Maine still had a bloc of delegates in early June as did former Vice President Hubert Humphrey and Washington Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson, Oliver said. Scores of other delegates were uncommitted or tied to favorite sons. Oliver hoped that his personal favorite, Duke University President Terry Sanford, might emerge from a deadlocked convention as a unity candidate.

"McGovern was having a hard time getting a majority," Oliver said. "The state chairmen wanted to know whether or not, if he won the California primary, he would have the nomination wrapped up or whether there was still a chance he could be stopped.

"We called every state chairman or party executive director to find out where their uncommitted delegates would go. We were doing a real hard count. We knew better than anybody else how many delegates could be influenced, who were really anti-McGovern. We had the best count in the country and it was all coordinated through my telephone."

So, while Nixon's political espionage team listened in from their room at the Howard Johnson's hotel across from the Watergate, Oliver and his little team canvassed state party leaders to figure out how the Democratic delegates planned to vote. "We determined on that phone that McGovern could still be stopped even if he won the California primary," Oliver said. "It would be very close whether he could ever get a majority."

## **The Texas Showdown**

After McGovern did win the California primary, the stop-McGovern battle focused on Texas and its Democratic convention, scheduled for June 13, 1972. "The one place he could be stopped was at the Texas State Democratic Convention," Oliver said.

A Texan himself, Oliver knew the Democratic Party there to be a bitterly divided organization, with many conservative Democrats sympathetic to Nixon and hostile to McGovern and his anti-Vietnam War positions. One of the best known Texas Democrats, former Gov. John Connally, had joined the Nixon administration in 1970 as Treasury Secretary and was helping the Nixon campaign in 1972.

In *The Haldeman Diaries*, Nixon's chief of staff H.R. Haldeman describes Connally providing valuable insights about the inner workings of the Democratic Party. Nixon's team even broached the idea with Connally that he might replace Spiro Agnew as Nixon's vice presidential running mate, an offer Connally declined.

Many other Texas Democrats were loyal to former President Lyndon Johnson who had battled anti-war activists before deciding against a reelection bid in 1968. "There had been a major fight in Texas between the Left and the Right, between the liberals and the conservatives," Oliver said. "They hated each other. It was one of these lifetime things."

Between the strength of the conservative Democratic machine and the history of hardball Texas politics, the Texas convention looked to Oliver like the perfect place to push through a solid anti-McGovern slate, even though nearly one-third of the state delegates listed McGovern as their first choice. Since there was no requirement for proportional representation, whoever controlled a majority at the state convention could take all the presidential delegates or divide them up among other candidates, Oliver said.

At Sanford's suggestion, Oliver decided to fly to Texas. When he reached the Texas convention in San Antonio, Oliver said he was stunned by what he found. The Johnson-Connally wing of the party appeared uncharacteristically generous to the McGovern campaign. Also arriving from Washington was one of Connally's Democratic protégés, the party's national treasurer Bob Strauss.

"I'm in the hotel and I'm standing in the lobby the day before the convention," Oliver said. "The elevator opens and there's Bob Strauss. I was really surprised to see him and he makes a bee-line straight for me. He says, 'Spencer, how you doing?' I say, 'Bob, what are you doing here?' He says, 'I'm a Texan, you're a Texan. Here we are. Who would miss one of these state conventions? Maybe we ought to have lunch.' He was never that friendly to me before."

Oliver was curious about Strauss's sudden appearance because Strauss had never

been a major figure in Texas Democratic politics. "He was a Connally guy and had no background in politics except his personal ties to Connally," Oliver said. "He hadn't been active in state politics except as Connally's fund-raiser. He wasn't a delegate to the state convention."

Plus, Strauss's chief mentor, Connally, was a member of Nixon's Cabinet and was planning to head up "Democrats for Nixon" in the fall campaign. Known as a smooth-talking lawyer, Strauss had made his first major foray into politics as a principal fund-raiser for Connally's first gubernatorial race in 1962. Connally then put Strauss on the Democratic National Committee in 1968. Two years later, Connally agreed to join the Nixon administration

"I wouldn't say that Connally and Strauss are close," one critic famously told *The New York Times*, "but when Connally eats watermelon, Strauss spits seeds."

Other Connally guys held other key positions at the state convention, including state chairman Will Davis. So, presumably the liberal, anti-war McGovern would have looked to be in a tight spot, opposed not only by Davis but also by much of the conservative state Democratic leadership and organized labor.

"It was clear that 70 percent of the delegates were anti-McGovern, so they very easily could have coalesced, struck a deal and blocked McGovern," Oliver said. "That probably would have blocked him from the nomination."

Oliver told some political allies at the convention, including party activists R.C. "Bob" Slagle III and Dwayne Holman, about the plan that had been hatched in Washington to shut McGovern out of Texas delegates.

"They thought it might work and agreed to promote it with the state Democratic leadership," Oliver said. "Bob went to lay out this plan to stop McGovern and I waited for him. (After he emerged from the meeting,) we went around the corner, and he said, 'It's not going to work.' He said, 'Will Davis thinks we ought to give McGovern his share of the delegates.'

"I said, 'What? Will Davis, John Connally's guy? Does he know that this will give McGovern the nomination?' He [Davis] said, 'We shouldn't have a big fight. We should all agree that everyone gets the percentage they had in the preference. We'll just let it go.'"

Oliver said, "That was the most astonishing thing I had heard in all my years of Texas politics. There's never been any quarter given or any asked in this sort of thing. Seventy percent of the delegates were against McGovern. Why did those die-hard conservatives and organized labor want to give him 30 percent of the votes? I was stunned."

After a 17-hour final session, the convention gave 42 national delegates to Alabama Gov. George Wallace and 34 to McGovern, with Hubert Humphrey getting 21 and 33 listed as uncommitted. According to *The New York Times*, the Texas results put McGovern about two-thirds of the way toward 1,509 needed for a first-round nomination.

Although failing at his Texas mission, Oliver continued to pursue his strategy of promoting Terry Sanford as a compromise Democratic nominee. He proceeded to Mississippi where Hodding Carter, a rising star among moderate Mississippi Democrats, agreed to nominate Sanford at the national convention. Oliver then returned to Washington, where he discussed the delegate situation by telephone with Fowler and other state chairmen before traveling to his father's summer home on the Outer Banks of North Carolina.

### **Watergate Burglars Caught**

On June 14, back in Washington, the Gemstone team began planning a return to the DNC's Watergate office to install new eavesdropping equipment. Liddy, famous for his tough-guy reputation, was under pressure from higher-ups to get more information, E. Howard Hunt, another ex-CIA officer and a key Watergate figure, said later.

When Hunt suggested to Liddy that targeting the Miami hotels to be used during the upcoming Democratic National Convention made more sense, Liddy checked with his "principals" and reported that they were adamant about sending the team back into the Watergate.

One person in the White House who was demanding continued vigilance over the Democrats was Richard Nixon. Though it's never been established that Nixon had prior knowledge about the Watergate break-in itself, the President was continuing to demand that his political operatives keep collecting whatever information they could about the Democrats.

"That business of the McGovern watch, it just has to be it has to be now around the clock," Nixon told presidential aide Charles Colson on June 13, according to a White House taped conversation. "You never know what you're going to find."

Facing demands from the "principals," Hunt contacted the Cuban-Americans in Miami on June 14. The burglars reassembled in Washington two days later. For this entry, James McCord taped six or eight doors between the corridors and the stairwells on the upper floors and three more in the sub-basement. But McCord applied the tape horizontally instead of vertically, leaving pieces of tape showing when the doors were closed.

Around midnight, security guard Frank Wills came on duty. An African-American

high school dropout, Wills was new to the job. About 45 minutes after starting work, he began his first round of checking the building. He discovered a piece of tape over a door latch at the garage level. Thinking that the tape was probably left behind by a building engineer earlier in the day, Wills removed it and went about his business.

A few minutes after Wills passed by, Gonzalez, one of the Cuban-American burglars, reached the now-locked door. He managed to open it by picking the lock. He then re-taped the latch so others could follow him in. The team then moved to the sixth floor, entered the DNC offices and got to work installing additional equipment.

Shortly before 2 a.m., Wills was making his second round of checks at the building when he spotted the re-taped door. His suspicions aroused, the security man called the Washington Metropolitan Police. A dispatcher reached a nearby plainclothes unit, which pulled up in front of the Watergate.

After telling Wills to wait in the lobby, the police officers began a search of the building, starting with the eighth floor and working their way down to the sixth. The hapless burglars tried to hide behind desks in the DNC's office, but the police officers spotted them and called out, "Hold it!" McCord and four other burglars surrendered. Hunt, Liddy and other members of the Gemstone crew still across the street at the Howard Johnson's hurriedly stashed their equipment and papers into suitcases and fled.

### **Hearing the News**

Oliver was at his father's cottage on North Carolina's Outer Banks when the news broke that five burglars had been caught inside the Democratic national headquarters in Washington.

"I heard about it on the television news," Oliver said. "I thought that was strange, why would anybody break into the Democratic National Committee? I mean we don't have any money; the convention's coming up and everybody's moved to Miami; the delegates have been picked and the primaries are over. So why would anybody be in there? I didn't think anything of it."

After returning to Washington, Oliver like other Democratic staffers was asked some routine questions by the police and the FBI, but the whole episode remained a mystery. "People were buzzing about it, talking about it, but people thought it was just crazy that anyone would have gone in there," Oliver recalled.

In July 1972, along with other Democratic officials, Oliver went to the national convention in Miami, where McGovern barely managed to secure a majority of delegates to win the nomination. After the victory, McGovern loyalists were

installed at the DNC in the Watergate offices. Jean Westwood replaced Larry O'Brien as national chairman and focused on unifying the party, which remained deeply divided between the McGovernites and party regulars.

"One of the problems we had was how do you get the state party people to work with the McGovern people," said Oliver, who was one of the officials trying to mend the schism. At a meeting of the Democratic executive committee in early September at the Watergate, Oliver was to give a report about cooperation on voter registration between the McGovern campaign and state party organizations.

"Someone brought me a note that Larry O'Brien called and wants you to call him," Oliver said. "I put the note in my pocket. The meeting went on. They brought a second note and said, 'Larry O'Brien wants you to call.' At the lunch break, I went upstairs to call O'Brien a little after 12 o'clock.

"I asked to speak to Larry. Stan Gregg, his deputy, came on the line: 'Spencer, Larry's at lunch, but he wanted me to tell you that he's going to have a press conference at 2 o'clock and he's going to announce that the burglars that they caught in the Watergate were not in there for the first time. They had been in there before, in May.'

"I was saying to myself, 'Why's he telling me all this?' He said, 'and they put taps on at least two phones. One of the phones was Larry's and one was yours.' I said, 'What?' And he said, 'the tap on Larry's didn't work. He's going to announce all this at 2 o'clock.'"

After digesting the news of the May break-in, Oliver called Gregg back, telling him, "'Stan, take my name out of that press release. I don't know why they tapped my phone, but I don't want my name involved in it. Let Larry say, there were two taps involved and one was on his. But I don't want to become embroiled in this.' He said, 'it's too late. The press releases have already gone out.'"

Oliver suddenly found himself at the center of a political maelstrom as the DNC moved to file a civil lawsuit accusing the Republicans of violating the federal wiretap statute.

"Immediately, I became the object of all sorts of speculation," Oliver recalled. "The worst thing about it was that other people on the national committee were jealous that my phone was tapped, not theirs. One of the worst was Strauss, who was reportedly saying things like 'I don't know why they tapped his phone. He didn't mean anything. He was an unimportant guy.' Everybody wanted to be the celebrity victim."

### **Smearing the Victim**

The wording of the wiretap statute, however, made Oliver a legally significant player, since only the bug on his phone worked and his conversations were the ones intercepted. "If somebody put a tap on your phone and if nobody listened to it, then you have no cause of action," said Oliver, a lawyer by profession. "You have to be able to prove interception and use. So I was crucial to the lawsuit."

The statute also created legal dangers for anyone who got information, even indirectly, from the wiretaps. "I realized that anybody who received the contents of the intercepted telephone conversation and passed them on, in other words, the fruits of the criminal act, was also guilty of a felony," Oliver said.

"So that meant that if someone listened to my phone, wrote a memo like McCord had done and sent it to the White House or to CREEP, everybody who got those memos and either read them or passed them on was a felon. It was a strict statute. Wherever the chain led, anybody who got them, used them, discussed them, sent them on to someone else was guilty of a felony and subject to criminal as well as civil penalties."

After the Democratic lawsuit was filed, lawyers for CREEP immediately took Oliver's deposition. Some of the questions were trolling for any derogatory information that might be used against him, Oliver recalled. "CREEP asked if I was a member of the Communist Party, Weather Underground, 'were you ever arrested?'" But some questions reflected facts that would have been contained in Gemstone memos, Oliver said, such as "Who is Terry Sanford?"

The FBI also launched a full field investigation of Oliver. "They tried to tie me to radical groups and asked questions of my neighbors and my friends about whether I had ever done anything wrong, whether I drank too much, whether I was an alcoholic, whether I had a broken marriage, whether I had had any affairs," Oliver said. "It was a very intrusive and obnoxious assault on my private life."

Initially, Nixon's Justice Department denied that the bug on Oliver's phone had been installed by the Watergate burglars, implying that the Democrats may have tampered with the crime scene by installing the wiretap themselves to create a bigger scandal. In a television interview, Attorney General Richard Kleindienst said the device on Oliver's phone must have been put on after June 17 because FBI agents had found nothing during "a thorough sweep" of the office.

Also, in September 1972 around the time the Democrats learned about the initial break-in and the bug on Oliver's phone John Connally joined Nixon's inner circle in discussing what to do about the growing Watergate scandal.

Haldeman diary entry for Sept. 13 noted that Nixon "had [former Attorney General



John] Mitchell, [CREEP chairman Clark] MacGregor, and Connally up for dinner and a general political planning session. Spent quite a little time on Watergate.”

Soon, Democrats were encountering solid stonewalls when they tried to crack the Watergate mystery through discovery in the wiretap case. “Our guys couldn’t get anybody’s deposition; everybody was stalling,” Oliver said. “It was clear to me that what’s going on was that the Justice Department was fixed, the FBI was fixed, and the only way we were going to get to the bottom of this was to have an independent investigation.”

In October 1972, Oliver wrote a memo to Sen. Sam Ervin, a moderate Democrat from North Carolina, recommending an independent congressional investigation as the only way to get to the bottom of Watergate, a task Ervin couldn’t undertake until the next year.

In the meantime, Nixon’s Watergate cover-up held. The White House successfully tagged the incident as a “third-rate burglary” that didn’t implicate the President or his top aides. On Election Day, Nixon rolled to a record victory over his preferred Democratic opponent, George McGovern, who only won one state, Massachusetts.

### **Covering Up Watergate**

The McGovern debacle had immediate repercussions inside the Democratic National Committee, where the party regulars moved to purge McGovern’s people in early December.

“Labor, conservatives, party establishment and others wanted to get rid of the McGovernites and they wanted Jean Westwood to resign,” Oliver said. “We had a bruising battle for the chairmanship. It ended up being between George Mitchell [of Maine] and Bob Strauss.”

The Strauss candidacy was strange to some Democrats, given his close ties to John Connally, who had led Nixon’s drive to get Democrats to cross party lines and vote Republican. Two Texas labor leaders, Roy Evans and Roy Bullock, urged the DNC to reject Strauss because “his most consistent use of his talents has been to advance the political fortune and career of his life-long friend, John B. Connally.”

Another Texan, former Senator Ralph Yarborough, said anyone who thinks Strauss could act independently of Connally “ought to be bored for the hollow horn,” a farm hand’s expression for being crazy.

For his part, Connally offered to do what he could to help his best friend Strauss. Connally said he would “endorse him or denounce him,” whichever would

help more. Strauss “displays in my judgment the reasonableness that the [Democratic] party has to have,” Connally said.

Behind the scenes at the White House, Nixon was already touting Connally as the next President, or as Haldeman noted, “he is the only one that any of us would want to see succeed the P. He’s got to run as a Republican and he’s got to make the move now” to formally switch parties.

“After a terribly hard-fought battle, Strauss won,” Oliver recalled. “Strauss came to the national committee the next week.”

Though supposedly on opposite sides of the political fence, Connally and Strauss stayed in touch, with Connally even upbraiding his former protégé for comments that Strauss made in December 1972 about the value of Democratic loyalty. Connally “had called [Strauss] and told him his remarks were ill-advised,” Haldeman recounted in his diary. Connally “said he was pretty tough and that Strauss was quite disturbed.”

Soon, it became clear that Strauss’s chief priority was to give the Democratic Party new direction as it tried to traverse a political landscape reshaped by the Nixon landslide. Strauss’s strategy called for putting the Watergate scandal into the past both by moving the DNC out of the Watergate complex and by trying to settle the Watergate civil lawsuit.

“Within a few days of his being there, I was called and told he wanted to see me,” Oliver said. “He said, ‘Spencer, you know I want to work with the state party chairs, but now that I’m here there’s something I want you to do. I want to get rid of this Watergate thing. I want you to drop that lawsuit.’”

“I said, ‘What?’ I didn’t think he knew what he was talking about. I said, ‘But, Bob, you know that’s the only avenue we have for discovery. Why would we want to get out of the lawsuit?’”

“He replied, ‘I don’t want that Watergate stuff anymore. I want you to drop that lawsuit.’ I said, ‘Bob, without me, there is no lawsuit under the law.’ He said, ‘I’m the chairman and I want you to do it.’ I said, ‘Bob, I work for the state chairmen’s association and I see no reason to do that.’ It was very unpleasant at the end.”

Oliver soon found himself cut adrift by the DNC lawyers who said they had to follow Strauss’s orders and back off the Watergate case, though privately they expressed hope that Oliver would find another lawyer and continue pursuing the case, Oliver recalled. “I said, ‘I can’t afford that.’”

Oliver was then studying for the bar, supporting three children and working two

jobs (for the state chairmen and for the American Council of Young Political Leaders). Plus, his marriage was on the rocks.

Oliver began a search for a new attorney willing to take on the powerful White House. He faced a string of rejections from other lawyers partly because so many Watergate figures had already hired attorneys at major firms that it created conflicts of interests for other law partners. Finally, at a dinner party in Potomac, Maryland, a personal injury lawyer named Joe Koonz offered to take the case on a contingency basis.

"They can't do anything to me," Koonz said, according to Oliver. "I'm a plaintiff's lawyer, a personal injury lawyer. You won't have to pay a thing. If we win, I'll get one-third and you'll get two-thirds, and I guarantee you if I get this thing before a jury, we'll win."

Oliver's success in keeping the civil suit alive represented a direct challenge to Strauss, who continued to seek an end to the DNC's legal challenge to the Republicans over Watergate. While Oliver didn't directly work for Strauss, the national chairman could force Oliver off the payroll.

"He couldn't fire me as executive director of the state chairmen's association, but he could cut off my pay, which he did after a big, nasty, ugly fight," Oliver said. "The state chairmen then paid my salary out of their own funds."

Strauss also moved the DNC out of Watergate, despite the favorable terms on the rent and the building's usefulness as a reminder of Republican wrongdoing. "Strauss said, 'I don't care what it costs to move. I want to get this Watergate thing behind us,'" Oliver said. "It was ridiculous. They moved the office across the city to a worse location for less space at more cost. Plus, they lost the symbol of Watergate."

## **A Rising Bush**

While Democratic leaders were debating whether to fold their hand on Watergate, Nixon was reshuffling his personnel deck for a second term. George H.W. Bush's credentials as a Nixon loyalist made him a top candidate for several senior administration jobs.

"A total Nixon man first," Nixon said in a discussion of Bush's future. "Doubt if you can do better than Bush." In one denigrating compliment, Nixon told Bush that he was high on the job lists because the administration needed "not brains but loyalty." Nixon concluded that Bush would fit best as chairman of the Republican National Committee, replacing Sen. Bob Dole, whom Nixon considered too independent and acerbic.

"Bush was perfect for the RNC," wrote Bush's biographer Herbert S. Parmet, "whistle-clean, a tonic for the GOP's public image, a nice guy to everyone, but tough. How else could he have built a career in oil and politics? A great combination: respectability and strength, able to firm up the administration's lines of control. He could be handy at the money-raising, too."

With more Watergate troubles looming in federal criminal court (over the five burglars) and in Congress (with Ervin's plans for public hearings), Nixon told Bush, "The place I really need you is over at the National Committee running things." Bush accepted though he was less than thrilled with the new job.

Bush's genial demeanor helped in negotiations with Strauss, a fellow Texan whom Bush also counted as a friend. By mid-April 1973, Strauss appeared on the verge of achieving his goal of putting the Watergate civil lawsuit into the past.

"I'm driving into work one day and I hear that Strauss and George Bush were holding a press conference at the National Press Club to announce that they were settling the Watergate case, putting it behind them," Oliver said. "I said he can't settle that suit without me. The Republicans were holding out \$1 million to settle that suit, but they couldn't settle it without me."

On April 17, 1973, Strauss disclosed that CREEP had offered \$525,000 to settle the case. "There has been some serious discussion for many months" between Democratic and CREEP lawyers, Strauss said. "It has become intense in the past several weeks." Strauss explained his interest in a settlement partly because the Democratic Party was saddled with a \$3.5 million debt and could not afford to devote enough legal resources to the case.

But two days later, Strauss backed off the settlement talks because Oliver and Common Cause, another organization involved in the civil case, balked. "We haven't the slightest intention of settling short of what we set out to get," said Common Cause chairman John Gardner. "I think that the Democratic National Committee suit and ours are the two that are least susceptible to control."

At a press conference, Oliver declared, "I am appalled at the idea of ending the civil suit in the Watergate case through a secretly negotiated settlement and thereby destroying what may be an important forum through which the truth about those responsible may become known. I do not know what motivated Robert Strauss to even contemplate such a step."

For his part, Strauss said he had discussed a settlement with former Attorney General Mitchell "with the knowledge and approval of the Democratic leadership on the Hill after talking to a number of Democratic governors and with eight or 10 members of the Democratic National Committee." Asked if he was compromising

the interests of the Democratic Party, Strauss responded, "If I was doing so, I was doing so with a lot of company."

After the public flare-up over the aborted Watergate settlement, the strained relationship between Oliver and Strauss grew even worse. Oliver said, "Strauss started calling around to state chairs, saying 'Did you see what that little SOB said about me? He's accusing me of being a crook.' He really launched a campaign against me."

Meanwhile, inside the Nixon administration, Connally took a more active role on Watergate, meeting with RNC chief Bush and urging the President to take some forceful action to get ahead of the expanding scandal. "Bush says that Connally wants something done drastically, that someone has to walk the plank and some heads have to roll," Haldeman recounted in his diary.

Haldeman discussed Watergate directly with Connally, who urged the White House to go on the offensive against the Senate committee. "We should be outraged at their demagoguery," Connally advised Haldeman, according to the diary entry. "Take them head-on in open session and grandstand it."

Haldeman wrote that Connally wanted senior White House officials to "go up and really put on an act, take the Committee on, try to nail them, that they'd been on a witch-hunt. You need some phrases. You need to be coached and rehearsed, each one of you. You might, by that, screw the Committee in people's minds and destroy it, or at least pull its teeth."

As the scandal continued to grow and the cover-up created new legal dangers Nixon even considered appointing Connally as Attorney General. Haldeman doubted Connally would take the job, drawing a response from Nixon that "Connally says he'll do anything he has to do."

### **Putting the Pieces Together**

Oliver said it was not until spring 1973 that he began putting the pieces of the Watergate mystery together, leading him to believe that the events around the Texas convention were not simply coincidental but rather the consequence of Republican eavesdropping on his telephone.

If that were true, Oliver suspected, Strauss may have been collaborating with his old mentor Connally both in arranging a Texas outcome that would ensure McGovern's nomination and later in trying to head off the Watergate civil lawsuit. That would not mean that Connally and Strauss necessarily knew about the bugging of the DNC, only that they had been used by Republicans who had access to the information from the Gemstone wiretappers, Oliver said.

"In my opinion, they were listening to me on that phone do a vote count and they're listening to us start a project to block McGovern's nomination," Oliver said. "They were scared to death that it would be Scoop Jackson or Terry Sanford" emerging as the Democratic nominee.

"This strategy is about to work and we're about to stop McGovern. Now, how do you block that? Well, the man who Nixon admired the most in the world, who he wanted to be his Vice President was John Connally. And who could block it in Texas? John Connally. Who was the state party chairman? Who controlled the machinery? John Connally's people. No Republican could have done it. Only Connally. They had to go directly to him because he's the only one who could fix it.

"But Connally wasn't somebody who could be called by just anybody. So I believe what happened was that they went to Connally Haldeman or Nixon, maybe Mitchell or [Charles] Colson but it had to be one of them. They must have briefed him on what they knew, and what they knew is what they got off the interception of my telephone.

"Nixon wanted Connally to be his successor, but this is in jeopardy if Nixon doesn't get reelected. So Connally may have contacted Will Davis and may have sent Strauss to Texas."

McGovern got his share of the Texas delegates after a marathon session that ended at 3:31 a.m. on June 14, 1972. That same day, according to Hunt, Liddy was told by his "principals" that the burglars needed to return to the Democratic offices at the Watergate to install more eavesdropping equipment. Three days later, the Watergate burglars were arrested.

"Once they were caught, they [Nixon and his men] had to cut off our avenue of discovery, which of course was the civil suit," Oliver said. "I think Strauss may have run for national chairman for that purpose. Strauss wanted to kill the Watergate thing because he may have been part of this conspiracy to help nominate McGovern, part of the conspiracy to cover up the Watergate matter and put it behind us.

"In desperate fear of exposure later on, he tried to crush me. Somebody told me about a conversation with Strauss when someone said, 'Spencer's never going to give in on the Watergate thing,' and Strauss said, 'When he doesn't have any more income, he'll be a lot more reasonable.'"

In retrospect, the idea of leading Democrats shying away from the Watergate scandal in 1973 may seem odd, but the major breaks in the cover-up had yet to occur. At the time, the prospect that the scandal might lead to Nixon's

removal from office appeared remote. As late as April 1974, Strauss chastised Democratic governors for calling for Nixon's resignation.

Over the next quarter century, Strauss would come to epitomize the national Democratic leader who cultivated friendly relations with Republicans. His friendship with Bush confidante James Baker III was cemented when Strauss headed President Jimmy Carter's failed reelection bid in 1980, while Baker, also a Texan, held a top job in the Reagan-Bush campaign.

After Carter's loss in 1980, the defeated Democratic President joked to his staff that "Bob is a very loyal friend he waited a whole week after the election before he had dinner with Ronald Reagan."

Strauss also counted himself one of George H.W. Bush's closest friends, accepting an appointment as Bush's ambassador to Moscow in 1991. A senior Bush administration official explained the appointment to *The New York Times* by saying, "The President wants to send one of his best friends" to Moscow.

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).**

---