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Washington Merry-Go-Round by JACK ANDERSON

WASHINGTON — Despite pious protestations to the contrary, the Nixon Administration has been hounding the 80-year-old former Speaker, John McCormack, who retired from public life last January with a presidential plaque.

President Nixon proclaimed his "great admiration and respect" for McCormack, and White House press secretary Ron Ziegler solemnly denied that the Administration was investigating McCormack's activities. Yet on September 13, two U.S. Attorneys, Richard Ben-Veniste and W. Cullen MacDonald, paid a quiet call on the old man and grilled him about a hardship discharge he had sought for a Navy enlisted man.

The two investigators finally agreed not to bait the grieving McCormack in his hospital room where he is keeping a lonely vigil at the bedside of his beloved wife Harriet. During more than 50 years of marriage, he has never spent a night apart from her. Now he has moved into Washington's Providence Hospital where he sits day after day beside the life-long companion who, sadly, seldom recognizes him.

McCormack balked at answering the gumshoes' questions at

the hospital for fear it might upset his wife. So arrangements for the interview were made at the Washington law office of his nephew, Edward McCormack.

The former Speaker's answers will be presented to a federal grand jury in Miami. His former aide, Doctor Martin Sweig, will also be brought to Miami from the federal penitentiary in Lewisburg, Pa., for questioning tomorrow (November 2).

We exposed how Sweig, using McCormack's name and sometimes imitating his voice, fixed federal cases for a five percenter named Nathan Voloshen. Sweig is now serving a 30-month sentence for perjury.

We emphasized, however, that our investigation showed no skulduggery by the former Speaker. He did government favors for his friends and constituents in the tradition of South Boston's "Last Hurrah" politics. But we could find no evidence that he ever took a penny for these favors. On the contrary, he carefully segregated his personal and congressional accounts, scrupulously paying all personal postage, telephone calls and other bills out of his own pocket. He routinely turned down campaign contributions, since he had almost no campaign expenses.

INVESTIGATION DENIED —

We reported that the Nixon Administration, nevertheless, was conducting a criminal investigation of McCormack at the same time that President Nixon honored him at a White House luncheon. Our story brought an angry denial from Press Secretary Ron Ziegler, who called in reporters to tell them:

"I very seldom do this, but I want to give you this bit of information that appeared in a column by Jack Anderson . . . I would like to volunteer and state quite categorically that any allegations that the Nixon Administration tried in any way to seek or to pin criminal charges on Speaker McCormack, as the column suggests, is totally and absolutely false and without any foundation whatsoever."

Ziegler added, for extra emphasis, that he had "talked with the Attorney General" who confirmed that the Justice Department was not investigating McCormack.

Yet even as Ziegler was issuing his categorical denial, a federal grand jury in New York City was trying to pin criminal charges upon the retiring Speaker. Three of McCormack's closest friends, who had been invited to the White House luncheon in his honor, were subpoenaed before the grand jury just a few days after listening to the President praise McCormack and present him with a plaque.

The three were Rubin Epstein, president of the Boston's City Bank and Trust; George Feldman, former ambassador to Malta and Luxembourg; and Peter Cloherty, consultant for a Boston engineering firm. They were asked whether they had ever given McCormack any payments or gifts in return for government favors.

RECORDS SUBPOENAED —

The grand jury also subpoenaed McCormack's financial records from the Boston City Bank and demanded all the Cloherty firm's records relating to federal contracts. The testimony completely exonerated McCor-

mack, and the bank records showed he had only a modest savings account. The old man's total net worth, an accumulation of a lifetime, was estimated around \$100,000.

A few days ago, the Justice Department's Richard Benveniste turned up in Boston where he is still prying into McCormack's affairs. He went through the Speaker's private papers which are stored at Boston University. McCormack had willingly given him permission to examine them. The U.S. Attorney made off with a file dealing with a hardship discharge for H. A. Keller, Jr., son of a Miami industrialist. The young man had sought to get out of the Navy in 1959 because of his wife's poor health.

The Justice Department's gumshoes also questioned McCormack about his relationship with Michael Silbert of Miami. They asked whether he had accepted any payments, gifts or contributions from Silbert for seeking Keller's discharge. The ex-Speaker replied that he had known Silbert for 15 years but had never accepted anything more substantial from him than a box of cigars.

The Justice Department, meanwhile, has offered to help soften Sweig's sentence in return for his "cooperation." Sweig's attorney, Paul Smith, told us the inference, if never stated outright, was that Sweig should give evidence against McCormack.

This is what has happened since Ziegler, in behalf of the President and Attorney General denied our story about the investigation of McCormack. It may give the public an idea as to the worth of a White House denial.