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Hughes Watergate Role Hinted

The biggest Watergate mystery of them all has never been cleared up. What was Howard Hughes' strange role in the scandal?

The late billionaire was the only major Watergate figure who eluded the special prosecutors to the end. Yet some Watergate investigators believe he was the cause of the Watergate break-in.

His man in Washington, Robert Bennett, kept turning up mysteriously throughout the Watergate plot. White House informer John W. Dean III commented that Bennett "became as mysterious in his inconspicuous presence as Howard Hughes was in his conspicuous absence."

We have searched Hughes' private papers, now in federal custody, for clues. The papers show that the phantom billionaire followed the Watergate investigation avidly. For example, he demanded an immediate report from his attorney, Chester Davis, on White House counsel Fred Buzhardt's secret testimony before the Senate Watergate Committee.

Davis responded in a May 8, 1974, memo: "I am informed that Buzhardt (a) effectively asserted the attorney-client privilege and (b) did not testify to anything relating to (you). The transcripts of those hearings are secret, and it may be some time before I can get more detailed information."

In other memos, Davis confided that he was on good terms with "Senator Sam" as he called Senate Special Watergate Committee Chairman Sam Ervin Jr. (D-N.C.), and that he was "cooperating" with attorneys for

C.G. (Bebe) Rebozo, the sidekick of then-President Nixon.

Hughes sympathized completely with Nixon during the Watergate investigation, and the men around him tended, in the way of subordinates, to reflect his views. "Since the Watergate incident," wrote Davis, "there has been a bitterly fanatic political movement to destroy Nixon."

Another Hughes aide, Richard Hannah, characterized Nixon's critics as "the hypocrites, the holier-than-thou elements, the very-very righteous."

Unhappily, the Hughes papers merely heighten the mystery of Hughes' involvement in the Watergate scandal. The documents discuss these fascinating developments:

- The papers acknowledge that a Hughes aide, Richard Danner, delivered two separate \$50,000 cash bundles to Key Biscayne, Fla., and San Clemente, Calif., for Nixon's use after the 1968 election. The money was turned over to Rebozo, who returned it seven years later. In the meantime, Hughes' Washington operator, Bob Bennett, delivered \$150,000 to the Nixon re-election campaign. This reportedly included some blank checks which Watergate plumber G. Gordon Liddy filled in.

- When we broke the story of the \$100,000 cash gift to Nixon, it reportedly caused panic inside the White House. Nixon aides suspected that we got our information either from then-Democratic National Chairman Larry O'Brien or from Las Vegas publisher Hank Greenspun. Both had access to Hughes documents.

- Liddy began planning the Watergate break-in, according to subsequent testimony, with the understanding that he had approval to tap O'Brien's phone and break into Greenspun's safe. At this time, his co-plumber, E. Howard Hunt, worked for Bennett yet was also on the White House payroll.

- Bennett put Hunt together with Ralph Winte, a Hughes security man. Hunt later confessed that they discussed burglarizing Greenspun's safe. According to Hunt, he was supposed to provide the burglars with a get-away plane. It is uncertain whether the safe cracking was ever attempted. But White House aide John Ehrlichman later reported to Nixon that Liddy and Hunt "flew out, broke his safe, got something out." Greenspun said someone tore off the cover plate of his safe but failed to open it.

- Former White House aide Charles Colson has also said that he has "good reason to believe that Bob Bennett was somehow involved in the decision to go after 'Brien.'" Chester Davis later reported to Hughes that the Senate Watergate committee was trying to link the O'Brien and Greenspun episodes.

- The Watergate caper remained a mystery for months after the break-in. Yet on July 10, 1972, less than a month afterward, Bennett reported "detailed knowledge of the Watergate incident" to his CIA case officer. Howard Hughes, incidentally, was probably the CIA's largest contractor.

Yet the special prosecutors never got a chance to question the elusive Hughes.