

White House Approved Airline Sale

By Jack Anderson

LAS VEGAS—Phantom billionaire Howard Hughes went through the back door of the White House in 1969 to gain presidential approval for his purchase of Air West.

Because the airline is an international carrier, with routes to Canada and Mexico, the sale had to have President Nixon's okay.

The backdoor approach was made by Richard Danner, a Hughes hotelman, to the President's sidekick, Bebe Rebozo. Despite Hughes' poor management of Trans World Airlines, the Civil Aeronautics Board approved the Air West deal on June 15, 1969. Nixon signed the papers six days later.

Not long afterward, \$50,000 from a Hughes gambling casino was slipped to Rebozo by Danner. Still another \$50,000 was passed from Danner to Rebozo the following summer.

Sources close to Robert Maheu, who headed Hughes' Nevada operation in those days, have told us about the secret payments.

Danner was chosen to seek Rebozo's intervention in the Air West acquisition, they say, because the two men had known each other in Miami.

Later, at Hughes' behest, Maheu instructed Danner to hand

over \$50,000 to Rebozo. Maheu insisted the money was intended not as a bribe but as a belated contribution to Nixon's 1968 campaign.

The second \$50,000 payoff was made in Maheu's presence. He claimed this was a donation to the 1970 congressional campaign.

A White House spokesman denied that President Nixon ever received the \$100,000 from Hughes. Neither Rebozo nor Danner could be reached for comment.

Investigators for the Senate Watergate committee are trying to trace what happened to the money after it reached Rebozo. Sources close to Rebozo would say only that he has never diverted campaign money into his own or the President's personal projects.

There is also interest in the Danner-Rebozo dealings at the Securities and Exchange Commission, which is secretly investigating Hughes' acquisition of Air West.

Our own investigation began two years ago when we first reported that \$100,000 had been siphoned from the Silver Slipper, a Hughes gambling emporium, and had been delivered through Rebozo as a cash "campaign contribution" to President Nixon.

Again last week, I flew to Las Vegas and Los Angeles seeking additional facts. My associate, George Clifford, made a separate 9,000-mile swing to Vancouver, Canada, and to southern California.

In the outskirts of Vancouver, he located John Meier, a former Hughes consultant, who contended that the President's brother, Donald Nixon, had also played a role in the Air West deal.

This is the same brother who stirred up a national controversy by borrowing \$205,000 from Hughes in 1956 and putting up only a \$13,000 lot as collateral. Although he never paid back the loan and embarrassed his famous brother, Don Nixon continued to promote business deals with the Hughes organization.

As the Air West negotiations approached a climax in 1969, Meier was suddenly ordered to keep Don Nixon out of the transaction. "I was told," said Meier, by Gen. Ed Nigro of the Hughes staff "to stay away from Don because they had the Air West situation under control, and they didn't want Don and myself screwing it up.

"I was also told by General Nigro that Dick Danner of the Hughes organization was working along with Bebe Rebozo

and that this liaison was more important than working through Don Nixon."

Shortly thereafter, Meier resigned from the Hughes staff. He is now being sued by the Hughes organization for his involvement in the purchase of mining properties for the eccentric billionaire. Meier is also under indictment on a tax evasion charge.

Meier said Don Nixon had recruited ex-Rep. Patrick J. Hillings (R-Calif.), a close friend of Richard Nixon's and a director of Air West, to swing the Air West deal. We have seen billings which show that Hillings charged Hughes \$4,000 a month in legal fees, plus expenses.

One bill for \$2,305.85 included dinners with White House staff members and a "reception for White House staff and new officials of Nixon administration."

Sources close to the Hughes operation claim Hillings was paid for working on a helicopter contract, not for the Air West deal. Hillings couldn't be reached for comment.

A call to Don Nixon's unlisted telephone number produced a voice, sounding suspiciously like Nixon's, which insisted Nixon wouldn't talk to us.

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