

Watergate middleman runs for Senate

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WASHINGTON - Two decades after serving as a middleman for two convicted Watergate burglars in the days immediately following the infamous break-in, Bob Bennett is running for a Senate seat on a promise to turn "politics as usual" on its head.

Ironically, Bennett, the Republican candidate for Utah's open Senate seat, sees his connection with Watergate as an asset instead of a liability.

"Because I went through that 18 years ago and saw how destroying it can be - individually as well as to the country - I am better equipped than any candidate in the state to see that we don't have a repeat," Bennett said recently.

One recent independent poll shows Bennett with a comfortable lead over his Democratic opponent, Rep. Wayne Owens. "It's amazing," said one Democratic strategist involved in the race. "People are searching for someone who's an outsider. Somebody who isn't tied in to politics as usual. And here you have Bennett, who's connected to the most damaging political scandal of the century."

In 1974, we uncovered a secret CIA memorandum, which said that three days before the celebrated break-in at the Watergate, Bennett knew about a separate White House plot to burglarize and bug the campaign headquarters of Sen. George McGovern, but kept quiet. Because Bennett's public relations firm was a front for the CIA, Bennett revealed this information to his contact at the CIA, who then prepared the memo.

Bennett does not dispute the existence of the memo, but contends it was an exaggeration by his CIA contact. What is beyond dispute, however, is the fact that if Bennett had blown the whistle on the burglary plot, the subsequent Watergate caper would have been aborted and the course of history might have been changed.

Jack Anderson

Bennett, who has never been accused of any wrongdoing in the affair, calls his role in Watergate that of "an innocent bystander that happened to be close to some of the major players."

Three days after the bugging and break-in of the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate Hotel in June 1972, Bennett ducked into a drug store a block from the White House to meet secretly with G. Gordon Liddy. By Bennett's own admission, the scene was reminiscent of a James Bond movie. Liddy was in charge of Richard Nixon's dirty tricks squad, and was later convicted for his central role in the burglary.

Liddy and Bennett knew one another quite well. As the Washington lobbyist for the reclusive billionaire Howard Hughes, Bennett had delivered up to \$150,000 from Hughes to Nixon's re-election campaign - including some blank checks. Liddy's secretary filled them in with amounts dictated by Liddy.

But this time, Liddy wanted to find out where his co-conspirator in the burglary, E. Howard Hunt, was hiding out. A former CIA agent, Hunt had been working simultaneously for Bennett's PR firm and the White House's team of tricksters.

Bennett remembers that as he and Liddy stood side by side in front of the store's magazine rack, they each pretended to read a magazine. "Tell Howard that Mr. Pinga has information for him," Liddy whispered out of the side of his mouth. Mr. Pinga, an obscenity in Spanish, was Liddy's code name.

Liddy offers a different version of the encounter. In his memoir, Liddy

writes that Bennett requested the clandestine meeting so that Bennett could pass the following message from Hunt to Liddy: "Bring money and a lawyer" to Hunt, who Bennett said was hiding out in Beverly Hills. Bennett disputes that account, but admitted to us that he tracked Hunt down in New York on Liddy's behalf.

Nixon counsel John Dean also mentions Bennett in his memoir: "Bennett, for his part, (amazed) me by turning up as a crucial behind-the-scenes player in most matters that came to plague the Nixon White House." Bennett concedes that his involvement with key Watergate figures has spawned a web of speculation, but contends that he was simply "a bit naive."

"People overlook the fact that (Liddy and Hunt) were a couple of dumb guys," Bennett told us. "That's what it boils down to. They were a couple of keystone cops. The subsequent obstruction of justice, the cover-up and the paranoia in the White House is another story. Some of that gets pretty sinister. But the rest of it was not very complicated."

While his opponent, Owens, is trying to hold Bennett's feet to the fire over his Watergate days, Bennett has returned the favor. "I would rather have this cloud ... over my head than the kind of clouds Wayne has hanging over his head," Bennett said in reference to Owens' 87 overdrafts at the House bank. Owens recently received a letter from the Justice Department's special counsel, who is probing the House bank scandal, clearing him of any wrongdoing in the affair.

"He's been an insider in the worst sense of the word for much longer than I've been an insider in the best sense of the word - as an elected representative," Owens told our associate Ed Henry.

The Jack Anderson column is written by Jack Anderson and Michael Binstein and is distributed by United Feature Syndicate.