

Washington Merry-go-round

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WASHINGTON—The Justice Department has pieced together enough evidence, insiders say, to indict ex-Rep. Otto Passman, D-La., in the Korean payoff scandal. But out of compassion, government attorneys are reluctant to bring charges against the aging, ailing Passman.

He was born at the turn of the century to tenant farmers, and his early memories are of meals of unseasoned corn bread and clabbered milk. In the summers in backward Washington Parish, his feet were bare as the table, and at 10 he was hired out to a neighboring farmer for \$5 a month.

The memory of his grim childhood developed in Passman a fierce attachment for every dollar that passed through his hands. Apparently, he couldn't bring himself to let go of the cash that his Korean benefactors allegedly proffered.

On congressional junkets, he was an almost compulsive barterer and buyer at jewelry stores from Geneva to Hong Kong. On his return to the United States, he would demand that Customs pass his luggage unopened.

Customs officers visited his Capitol office in 1964 to quiz him about bringing in undeclared jewelry. Passman admitted he had brought some jewelry home with him from Hong Kong, but he insisted it was just on consignment. He, therefore, didn't feel a need to clear it through

customs. The Customs agents left without further argument.

While Passman treated every dollar with tenderness, he was not unmindful of those less blessed. He tithed to the church and was an active Mason. When friends were down on their luck, he was available for a loan and a lecture on economy and Christian living.

At age 77, he is beginning to falter. His six-foot frame, once lean and straight, is now frail. His voice, once stern with righteousness, now quivers. He recently spent 27 days in the hospital; now he must go back for additional treatment.

He told us that he had refused some jewelry that Tongsun Park had once offered him. The only money he ever accepted, he said, was in exchange for watches. He dealt in antique watches and sold "several" to Park, Passman said. Then he added plaintively: "I don't know why people are after me. I am just not able to fight any more."

WATERGATE INCIDENT— There are still a few jigsaw pieces missing from the watergate puzzle. The Nixon tapes reveal, for example, that Richard Nixon hoped to save his own skin by offering the special prosecutor a sacrificial lamb.

The scapegoat he had in mind, according to the tapes, was his own close friend and former law partner, ex-Attorney General John Mitchell. It was

whispered around Washington that Mitchell had learned of the double-cross and had turned balky and bitter.

The real truth, we've now learned, is that Mitchell offered himself as a sacrificial lamb. He would be willing to plead guilty to a felony, he proposed, if the special prosecutor would spare Nixon.

Mitchell directed his attorney, William Hundley, to present the offer to the special prosecutor's office in 1973. Hundley spoke to James Neal, who was then second in command under Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox. The prosecutors, however, refused to make a deal.

So far as our sources know, Mitchell never told Nixon about his gesture.

Footnote: Of course, Nixon was pardoned, and Mitchell is now serving out his sentence. Attorney Hundley, meanwhile, has made a personal appeal to Attorney General Griffin Bell to release Mitchell for medical treatment.

"In typical John Mitchell fashion," wrote Hundley, "the down-played the medical problem when interviewed by the probation officer... I am really concerned that the constant pain, the need for surgery and the continued incarceration, coupled with all his other problems, could be too much even for a

strong man like John Mitchell."

MERRY XXMAS— Exxon simply won't allow X's in Xmas. Like a modern scrooge, the giant, multibillion-dollar oil consortium has stopped a small Dallas firm from selling XXmas cards.

The Horchow Collection, in its Christmas card catalog, offered an ingenious card patterned after an Exxon credit card but using "XXmas Greeting" in place of the word Exxon.

The card seemed harmless enough; it might even be considered a free ad for the oil conglomerate. But Exxon takes itself with such seriousness that it threatened legal action.

"Exxon's lawyers took exception to it," explained Horchow's Ms. Kitty Lane, with a notable lack of Christmas cheer in her voice. "To try to fight something like Exxon, it's a losing battle."

Horchow sent out a letter to customers who had ordered the card, asking them to choose another one. "If Exxon were represented by a reindeer instead of a tiger," the letter suggested, "it might have been a different story."

In New York City, an Exxon spokesman confirmed that the company had asked Horchow to kill the Xmas card. "It was clearly a trademark infringement," he told us. We thought we heard him add: "Humbug!"