



Jack Amdeler SODM

Curious case of Congressman Collins

WASHINGTON — More than two years ago, we reported that Rep. Jim Collins, the resplendent Dallas Republican, had been squeezing salary kickbacks out of his staff.

To add indignation to illegality, he is a multimillionaire who had stooped to chiseling small sums from his young secretaries.

Our report triggered an on-again, off-again FBI investigation that will climax this week in Washington when criminal charges are tried in federal court.

THE ACCUSED, however, is not Congressman Collins. Instead, it is 33-year-old George Haag, his former administrative assistant, whom the government has accused of arranging the elaborate kickback operation in Collins's office.

The congressman, it seems, has been cleared of all blame. His name is mentioned only in passing in the government's eight-page indictment of Haag. The prosecution has no plans to call Collins as a witness.

This is curious, for he acknowledged to us during our original investigation that he was fully aware of the kickbacks but didn't know they were illegal.

What's more, Haag insists that Collins helped to plan the kickback scheme. Haag has passed a lie detector test which included two questions on this crucial point.

THE FIRST kickbacks — which we reported and Collins acknowledged — are not included in the government's charges. Also left out is a \$600 cash kickback that Sue McMahon, another former Collins employe, has sworn under oath she was required to pay directly to the congressman during his 1908 campaign.

The government's evidence includes five checks made out to Haag by Ray Fortner, a Collins aide who the government now says kicked back part of his salary to Haag.

But the government also has three other checks dated at precisely the same time, from Fortner to Collins himself.



These are drawn for even larger amounts of money. Two of the checks bear the cryptic typed notation "as per agreement."

Apparently the government has concluded that Fortner's payments to Haag constituted an illegal kickback but his larger payments to the congressman were perfect all right.

THERE'S MORE. The FBI investigated Collins' kickback operation with all the boldness of a medieval peasant coming before the king.

The G-men even submitted their questions in writing in advance to a Texas law firm hired by the congressman.

This provided time for Collins, his aides and his lawyers to work out an explanation of the kickback scheme and to get their stories straight. Young Haag, believing that

Collins's lawyers were looking out for him, went along.

When a federal grand jury began probing the matter last summer, Haag suddenly found himself isolated and identified as the culprit. He then decided he'd better get his own lawyer.

The Texas firm apparently fearful its own actions in the case might come under question, has now hired the famed Washington law firm headed by Edward Bennett Williams to look after its interests.

COLLINS HAS NOW retained a different lawyer, William Bitman, to watch out for him. As the rich congressman's representative, Bitman

has found the government prosecutors most co-operative.

We have learned, for example, that Bitman was able to get part of the case record put under seal so that it would not embarrass his client just before the Texas primary. The U.S. attorney's office actually prepared his motion and introduced it for him.

The motion was made without defense counsel even being notified, which raises serious ethical questions. Perhaps even more serious, however, are the questions raised by the fact that Judge Oliver Cash, himself, a former U.S. attorney, promptly granted the motion.