

Bittman Testimony Held Inconclusive

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The House Judiciary Committee talked for seven hours yesterday with E. Howard Hunt's former lawyer, William O. Bittman, but most members said afterward the session did not help to answer the question of whether President Nixon should be impeached.

The lawyer members were fascinated, however, with the size of the \$156,000 fee which Bittman told them his firm collected for representing Hunt, who pleaded guilty for his involvement in

the break-in of Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate here on June 17, 1972. Bittman also said Hunt owed \$50,000 more for legal work which he will not try to collect, members said.

Rep. Don Edwards (D-Calif.) said Bittman told the committee that 15 lawyers in his firm had put in a total of 2,600 hours of work over the 14 months Bittman represented Hunt. Edwards said this included not only representation of Hunt, but also handling the estate of his wife, who died in a plane crash, and helping his children.

Asked how Bittman's testimony related directly to the issue of impeachment, Edwards said: "I don't know."

Rep. Robert McClory (R-Ill.) said the entire session with Bittman was "irrelevant to the inquiry." Much of the time was taken up by members insisting on invoking their right to interrogate each witness for five minutes. McClory said some of the 38 committee members have been "browbeating witnesses."

Bittman was requested as a witness by President Nixon's counsel, James D. St. Clair, who is trying to convince the committee that

the only possible grounds for impeachment would be if the President was involved in payment of hush money, and then to prove that money paid to Watergate defendants was for the legitimate purpose of the paying legal fees.

Bittman was both the first and the final link in the chain of events that led to payment of \$75,000 to Hunt on March 21, 1973. This was the day that Mr. Nixon said he was first told by then-White House Counsel John W. Dean III, that hush money was being paid Hunt

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and that more was needed. In some passage of White House transcripts of that taped conversation, the President seemed to be encouraging a payment of Hunt.

Dean told the President that money had been given the Watergate defendants since shortly after the break-in.

Frederick C. LaRue, an official at the Committee for the Re-election of the President who pleaded guilty to a charge of obstruction of justice for involvement in the payments, testified before the Senate Watergate committee that he transferred a total of \$210,000 to Bittman over a period of several months.

In March, 1973, Bittman initiated a series of phone calls which led through Dean to LaRue relaying Hunt's request for about \$120,000. On the evening of March 21, 1973, LaRue sent \$75,000 to Bittman, which was justified as legal fees. Bittman reportedly told the committee that he received a package that evening which he turned over unopened to Hunt.

St. Clair's apparent purpose in calling Bittman was to try to convince the committee that Bittman believed the payments were for legal fees, not hush money.

Whatever Bittman believed the money was for, Dean told the President that day that hush money had been paid, more was needed because Hunt had threatened to blackmail the White House for involvement in the Watergate cover-up and the President said at one point, "For Christ's sake, get it."

Rep. Edward Hutchinson (R-Mich.), a defender of the President, said, however, that he felt Bittman's testimony had tended to reinforce St. Clair's argument that money was paid without White House involvement.

The committee announced that it will call Charles W. Colson as a witness, probably next week. Colson, a former White House insider who has pleaded guilty and



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William O. Bittman, onetime lawyer for E. Howard Hunt, prepares to testify on Hill. At left are presidential lawyer James D. St. Clair and an assistant, John McCahill.

began serving a prison term Monday for obstruction of justice in the Ellsberg break-in, was involved in several activities the committee is examining as possi-

ble grounds for impeachment. He was the White House contact with the dairy industry, which won a sizable increase in dairy price supports after pledg-

ing a \$2 million campaign contribution to the President's 1972 campaign. He also reportedly discussed executive clemency for Hunt with the president.