

report
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Washington Merry-Go-Round by JACK ANDERSON

WASHINGTON — To drum up prejudice against Daniel Ellsberg while the government was preparing its case against him in 1971, the White House secretly asked a congressional committee to hold hearings on his theft of the Pentagon Papers.

The appeal for Ellsberg hearings was made by White House officials to the House Committee on Internal Security through the office of its cagey chairman, Rep. Richard Ichord, D-Mo., in June 1971. This was the same committee which the young Rep. Richard Nixon used as his stepping stone to national publicity 25 years ago with the Alger Hiss - Pumpkin Papers case.

Ichord's aide William Hecht confirmed to us that a White House official called him and confided: "Some committee is going to investigate this matter. It should be one with genuine interest in the national security."

When several more pressing calls followed, Hecht began to wonder just who at the White House was so eager for the hearings.

"Is this something the President wants done?" Hecht inquired.

"Yes," was the immediate White House response.

Ichord cautioned his aide that with criminal charges pending against Ellsberg, he would not risk prejudicing the case with pretrial publicity unless national security arguments were overwhelming.

"The only way I'd go ahead with this is if the President personally asked me," he instructed Hecht. Dutifully, the staffer informed the White House. Sure enough, within days a call came to Ichord from his acquaintance in the oval office, Richard Nixon.

As Ichord told us with a chuckle, "I thought, 'how am I going to be able to talk him out of this?'" But President Nixon made it easy by not bringing up the probe. And when Ichord shrewdly avoided bringing it up himself, the President warmly wished Ichord a "Happy

Birthday" and hung up.

Footnote: Today, the shoe is tightly on the other foot. Ex-Nixon aides face prosecution in the Watergate debacle and are now loudly complaining that their own cases are being prejudiced by congressional hearings.

Safety Sabotaged: As chairman of a House committee on the infirm, hard-working Rep. John Brademas, D-Ind., has labored for years to lift the burdens of the elderly, the crippled and the retarded.

But in private letters to the Department of Transportation, Brademas successfully opposed forcing bus manufacturers to make boarding safer for the aged and handicapped. Instead, he helped throw a \$24 million contract to his home-town bus firm which had refused to agree to the safety measures.

To be fair, Brademas is a liberal from a conservative district where every one of the 4,000 voters at AM General's vehicle plants in South Bend, Ind., casts a vital ballot. Moreover, South Bend still shudders over the Studebaker shutdown a decade ago which threw 7,000 workers out of jobs.

Though the 620-bus contract with the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority was important for Brademas' district, it was also a watershed issue for the nation's disabled. The WMATA, as the transit authority is called, was bravely trying to set national

precedents to put bus steps closer to the ground and make them less steep.

In its first big eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation with politically powerful bus makers — who do not want to change the design of their steep steps — the WMATA blinked. Under pressure from GM and FLXIBLE, Rohr Industries' bus division, the WMATA relaxed its standards for step-to-step distances from 9½ to 10 inches.

When AM General asked for still further relaxation, WMATA and its funding agency, the Department of Transportation,

both stoutly refused to give another inch on the safety of the disabled.

Transportation bluntly told AM General that its proposals would cause "confusion and stumbling," particularly among "the elderly and handicapped." The result would be injuries for those least able to pay for hospitalization.

But on the very day that Transportation was rejecting AM General's spirited appeal, the company quietly summoned up Brademas, who is chief deputy House majority whip as well as chairman of a key health and education subcommittee.

Brademas swiftly moved to turn the decision around. He called Transportation's mass transport czar, Frank Herringer, and, on the same afternoon, had his top aide, lawyer Jim Monney, pressure Herringer with a second call. Herringer agreed to a delay in opening bids.

Next day, Brademas hit

Herringer with a letter asking for "your careful personal attention . . . in order to insure that AM General is given every consideration it is entitled to . . ."

Six days later, Brademas shot off another letter, this time asking for Herringer's "close personal attention to AM General's request . . ."

Next day, Transportation capitulated. It reversed its courageous stand of only a week before and informed AM General meekly that "WMATA has approved the redesign of AM General's steps."

Not surprisingly, with the specifications now tailored to AM General's measure, the firm won the \$24 million contract. The losers, of course, were the tens of millions of elderly and handicapped who looked to Brademas for help.

Footnote: Brademas insisted that "providing a bus with substantial advantages for the elderly and the handicapped was never an issue." It was solely a matter of whether "WMATA would be allowed to use restrictive specifications to discriminate against" AM General, he explained.

At the Department of Transportation, a spokesman contended a compromise with AM General was proper. He said Brademas' concern was "welcomed by us," but was unnecessary since Transportation's own appeal system was already working toward a fair solution.