

Wallowing in Watergate

What were they hoping to hear on Larry O'Brien's phone?

by Ron Rosenbaum

WASHINGTON, D. C.—Explication deleted. Just before the expiring Ervin Committee released its final report last month, the Committee decided to cut a controversial 46-page staff study from the 2000-page document.

The deleted section contains the first full explication of the surprisingly extensive connections between Howard Hughes and Democratic National Committee Chairman Larry O'Brien. It details for the first time the intrigues linking Hughes and O'Brien with Robert Maheu, "the Mormon mafia," the mysterious Mullen Company, John Mitchell, Bebe Rebozo, and Richard Nixon. It advances a theory of the motive

behind the Watergate mission.

The official explanation for deletion of the Hughes-O'Brien staff report was that it's "too speculative" and that the Committee and its staff failed to agree among themselves whether the report nailed down the motive to the exclusion of all others. So two years after the crime the motive is still missing. Everybody knows who did it, who ordered it, who covered it up, who tried to cover up the cover-up, but nobody can agree why it was done in the first place—and just exactly what the Hunt-Liddy team was looking for and listening for in Larry O'Brien's office.

Last week I was shown a copy of the staff report on the Hughes-O'Brien connection.

The story the report tells begins back in July 1968, in the hermetically sealed private quarters of Howard Hughes on the top floor of the Desert Inn, Las Vegas.

It is, one month after the assassination of Bobby Kennedy and Hughes is contemplating the uncertain political situation. The status of Larry O'Brien, who served as Bobby's campaign manager and was soon to become Humphrey's, interests Hughes. He scrawls a memo to his chief lieutenant Robert Maheu.

"What is O'Brien going to do? Why don't we get a hold of him?" Hughes writes.

They get a hold of him.

Three times in the following year Maheu summons O'Brien to Las Vegas to make him an offer, and finally in October 1969 he makes an offer O'Brien doesn't refuse. That month O'Brien sets up a public relations firm in Washington called Larry O'Brien and Associates. First client: the Hughes Tool Company. Fee: \$15,000 per month. Services rendered? That's a good question. The report indicates that O'Brien had a hand in trying to arrange an out-of-court settlement of the Hughes TWA lawsuit. There is some mention of publicizing the "humanitarian ef-

George Bush was receiving a \$500 per day salary from Exxon.

When O'Brien finally left the Hughes payroll in February 1971 it was not a resurgent sensitivity to conflict-of-interest situations that prompted his departure. Instead it appears that O'Brien was squeezed out when the civil war within the Hughes organization resulted in the rout of Robert Maheu, O'Brien's patron, and the ascendancy of the so-called "Mormon mafia" management team.

and on most of the federal regulatory agencies it probably didn't do Hughes any harm to have the Democratic National Chairman on his payroll.

O'Brien never denied or attempted to cover up the fact that he was working for Howard Hughes, but he certainly didn't publicize the rela-

tionship very strenuously and he never revealed how much he was getting paid. In 11 months of serving two masters O'Brien received \$165,000 from Howard Hughes. While there may be no violation of the law in such conduct, consider the outcry if, for instance, it were revealed that Republican National Chairman

Enter Robert Bennett, a Mormon, a son of Utah Republican Senator Wallace Bennett and the man who succeeds in replacing O'Brien as chief Washington representative of the Hughes empire.

Until the Bahamas-nerve gas affair
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fair in 1970 Robert Bennett was nothing more than an obscure White House political operative in the Department of Transportation.

In July of 1970, four months before Hughes fired Maheu and flew to the Bahamas, Bennett received a call at his Department of Transportation office from an emissary of the Mormon faction asking him for information about U. S. plans to bury nerve

gas canisters on the ocean floor near the Bahamas. The Mormons may have been directed to Bennett by Chuck Colson, a friend of Bennett ever since 1966 when they worked together on Senator Bennett's reelection campaign.

After the Mormon nerve gas inquiry Bennett sent calls flying back and forth between himself and Colson, Colson and Bebe Rebozo about the ocean dumping scheme. (Apparently

...ue to hint at a far more extensive but Baker & Colson will concede'

Hughes, obsessed with the purity of fluids, wanted to insure that his contemplated new retreat in the Bahamas would not be tainted by a poisoned ocean.)

Although Bennett did not succeed in stopping the nerve gas dumping he must have succeeded in impressing his fellow Mormons with his high administration contacts.

In January 1971 Robert Bennett quite his Transportation job and came up with the money to buy a controlling interest in a public relations firm called Mullen and Company. The Hughes Tool Company (later Summa, Inc.) immediately gave Mullen and Company and its new president, Robert Bennett, a big retainer and responsibility for its entire Washington lobbying effort. By that time Larry O'Brien had been frozen out of the counsels of the Mormon mafia because of his association with Maheu, and within a month Hughes and Larry O'Brien Associates terminated their relationship by "mutual consent."

E. Howard Hunt was already working for the Mullen Company when Bennett arrived to take over. Hunt had been hired by Mullen the day after he retired from the CIA. For more than a decade before Bennett arrived at Mullen and Company with the Hughes account, Mullen had been providing cover jobs for overseas CIA agents and perhaps some domestic ones as well—Hunt retained his CIA "covert security clearance" even after he "retired" from the Agency to work for Mullen, according to Senator Baker's minority staff report on the CIA and Watergate. Shortly after Bennett became president of Mullen, the CIA

"case officer" assigned to the Mullen Company introduced himself and filled Bennett in on the company's CIA cover operations. Neither the Hughes-O'Brien report nor the Baker report explains why the new Hughes management chose a CIA-related firm to represent them, although it is commonly believed that the Hughes organization is the CIA's biggest contractor as far as providing cover jobs overseas.

Also working for Bennett at Mullen and Company was an individual whose connection with Watergate is less direct than Hunt's but nonetheless intriguing. His name is Robert Oliver, he's the man Bennett put in charge of day-to-day supervision of the Hughes account. It is Robert Oliver's son, R. Spencer Oliver, Jr., who turns out to be the only other person in the Watergate whose phone is tapped.

The tap on Oliver, Jr.'s, phone has yet to be explained adequately. Some testimony by the break-in team suggests that it was a "mistake," that after installing the bug in O'Brien's phone the team just picked one more phone at random for good measure. Some investigators assume the tap was installed because Oliver, Jr.'s, position as executive director of the association of Democratic State Chairmen would insure a priceless flow of political intelligence coming in over his wire. Most reports concur that if that's really what they wanted from the tap they didn't get it. All they got—and P. and D. are heard to complain bitterly about it on the White House transcripts—all they got was hours of Oliver, Jr.'s, discourse with various woman friends in many of the 50 states.

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Nevertheless, according to one Watergate investigator, Oliver, Jr.'s, position in the affair is more complicated than has been reported.

"Oliver, Jr., was CIA. . . . He was involved in some of the NSA stuff," the investigator told me. "He may have known Hunt through the Agency or met him through his father at Mullen but they were close at one time because back in '70 Hunt had lunch with Bennett and Oliver and the three of them talked about buying into the Mullen Company. . . . But Hunt later became suspicious of Oliver, said something about the circumstances under which he left the CIA, I think he may have decided Oliver was a Communist—you know Hunt."

Since Hunt was the operational director of the break-in team, it is unlikely that the decision to bug his one-time friend Oliver, Jr., was a "mistake" or an "accident." How it fit into the maze of CIA, CRP, and Howard Hughes connections in the case is still an unanswered question. Could Oliver, Jr., have been gleaning secrets about that nexus from Oliver, Sr., at Mullen and feeding them to O'Brien? Certainly the suspicion must have crossed Hunt's mind.

But the main target of course was O'Brien. More than a target, he was an ever growing obsession with the White House, Hughes, and their respective hirelings at Mullen and CRP. The Hughes and Nixon people were desperate to find out just what O'Brien had learned from Maheu about transactions between Hughes and the Nixon family, and just what could be done to "neutralize" O'Brien, so he'd keep his mouth shut about whatever he *did* know.

The White House political operatives went to work on Bennett as soon as he arrived at Mullen with the Hughes account.

Early in January 1971, according to the staff report, Charles Colson began pumping Bennett for information about O'Brien and Maheu. Then on January 18, 1971, Colson introduced Bennett to John Dean, the man in charge of Operation Sandwedge, the Nixon administration's first political intelligence gathering operation. Dean proceeded to pump Bennett about O'Brien, eliciting from him the tip that the size and number of O'Brien's paychecks from Hughes might prove embarrassing to O'Brien and the Democrats.

Then someone in the White House, either Dean or Haldeman, ordered chief "Sandwedge" investigator John Caulfield to probe the O'Brien-Maheu connection.

Caulfield reported back that according to his informants "in the intelligence community" there had been a "continuous" liaison between

ical agent. Caulfield also warned darkly that Intertel, the Hughes private intelligence army, might have accumulated some embarrassing information about some Nixon administration operations.

"According to the conversation in the intelligence community," Caulfield said, several high ranking Intertel officials who had come to the security agency after serving in Bobby Kennedy's Justice Department, "continued to have unauthorized access to sensitive government files in many areas." Caulfield raised the spectre of Intertel's passing such embarrassing intelligence on to O'Brien via Maheu or even directly to O'Brien.

"Indictment of Intertel principals," Caulfield recommended sternly, "would effectively neutralize the threat with potentially debilitating intelligence weaknesses for O'Brien's forces, and force them to try other sources."

The reason the White House was so obsessed with Hughes, O'Brien, and Maheu, Caulfield testified in executive session, "was because the White House thought Hughes had everything wired in Washington." White House people bugged O'Brien, according to this theory, not so much to get dirt on Democrats but to see what dirt Maheu had passed along to O'Brien from the Intertel bugs on them.

By January 1972 the deposed

Maheu seems to have become a kind of wild card, Ellsberg-at-large to Hughes and Nixon interests.

On January 23, 1972, Jack Anderson published for the second time his charge that the Hughes organization siphoned off \$100,000 from Hughes's Silver Slipper casino and had it delivered to Bebe Rebozo for the President's use. This time Anderson said he had documentary evidence to back up the charge, evidence reportedly leaked to him by Maheu or Maheu-ally Las Vegas Sun publisher Hank Greenspun. Eleven days later on February 3, 1972, the Times pub-

lished a front-page dispatch from Wallace Turner in Las Vegas which headlined the fact that "hundreds" of Howard Hughes's private handwritten memoranda were "readily available" to reporters and other interested parties in Las Vegas who knew whom to ask. The celebrated scrawls were said to be stashed in Hank Greenspun's office safe, presumably bestowed upon Greenspun by Maheu. Greenspun's safe was said to be the source of Anderson's column about the \$100,000 Hughes Rebozo gift. The February 3 Times story must have

raised the possibility in certain quarters that Maheu had made copies of the more embarrassing memos for Larry O'Brien.

At 11 o'clock the next morning G. Gordon Liddy walked into John Mitchell's office at the Justice Department bearing with him a scaled-down proposal for political wiretapping and electronic surveillance.

Liddy launched into an enthusiastic recitation of a list of possible targets, but according to the testimony of Dean and Magruder, also in

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attendance, only two Liddy projects excited John Mitchell's interest. One was bugging Larry O'Brien's office, the other was breaking into Greenspun's safe. (Mitchell denies discussing either matter.)

The O'Brien-Hughes staff report cites a wonderful bit of conversation in which Hunt proposes to Hughes security chief Robert Winte that Hughes and White House forces enter into a combined operation to break into Greenspun's safe, with Hughes forces supplying a getaway plane to Central America and Hunt supplying the actual entry team.

"Gee, suppose you get caught?" the Hughes man recalls asking Hunt.

"We're professionals," Hunt replied. "Don't worry about that."

The Hughes people, who had seen "professionals" come and go, were smart enough not to take Hunt seriously. When Watergate came up the White House wasn't.

So that's the story that has been cut out of the Ervin Committee final report. The staff study is thoroughly and meticulously drafted. Rather than being "too speculative," it carefully avoids some questions that cry out for speculation. What, for instance, is the relationship of the Hughes organization to the CIA in this affair—enmeshed as they both are within the Mullen Company?

Even though the fact-filled Baker report on the CIA role in Watergate has been dismissed as a Republican red herring designed to shift Watergate blame from the White House to the Agency, and even though Chuck Colson's CIA conspiracy charges have been dismissed as the product of a Christ-crazed search for a suit-

able devil, curious items continue to surface to hint at a far more extensive CIA role than anyone but Baker and Colson will concede.

Consider the following new bits and pieces:

- Washington Star columnist Carl Rowan claims that in a conversation last year "former CIA director Richard Helms casually mentioned to me that minutes after the burglars were seized inside the Watergate, someone at CIA wakened him to tell him of the arrests." Why would anyone disturb Helms's sleep over a third-rate burglary?

- Robert Bennett has acknowledged to Jack Anderson associate Les Whitten that he knew of the June 17 break-in plan at least three days ahead of time, which means that the CIA, through Bennett's case officer, could easily have had prior knowledge of it.

- Douglas Caddy, the lawyer Hunt and Liddy called a few minutes after the break-in team was arrested

**VERY INTERESTING!*

inside the Watergate, turns out to be a former CIA employe according to a Watergate investigator.

- Lawyer Paul O'Brien, who sat in with John Dean on all the original FBI interviews ostensibly representing CRP, turns out to have been a former CIA man whose law firm had a contract like Mullen and Company's to provide cover for CIA agents.

- The law partner of Presidential attorney James St. Clair served as president for a CIA front called "Anderson Security Consultants, Inc."

- Convicted burglar Frank Sturgis claims in a True magazine interview that the break-in team had received a detailed description from the CIA of a particular document the Agency wanted them to look for in the DNC Watergate offices: "We knew this secret memorandum existed—knew it for a fact because both the CIA and the FBI had found excerpts and references to it in some confidential investigations they had conducted some months earlier . . . it was 130 typed pages . . . there were two main parts to it. One was a long detailed listing of all the covert espionage and sabotage and counter-subversive operations the CIA and the DIA have launched against Cuba since 1965 or '66 . . . It said that the CIA did not provide the truth about these operations even to

American political leaders, therefore the Cubans were providing an itemized list of all such 'abuses.' . . . We looked high and low for this document and although we found a piece of it one night at another office we never did find the entire thing."

If such a document did exist, it would provide a motive for CIA participation in the break-in. Up until now the only motive cited to support the theory of CIA participation has been some variation of a far-fetched double-agent theory in which the CIA is out to destroy the White House for some reason or other. Sturgis's description of the 130-page memorandum makes it conceivable that the CIA had a genuine interest in seeing whether the Democrats had such a document—or at least that Hunt had an interest in finding something that might please his CIA superiors.

If the Hughes-O'Brien staff report leads us to the inescapable conclusion that Howard Hunt was serving two masters—the White House and the Mormon mafia—on his mission inside the Watergate, the evidence continuing to emerge of CIA participation may soon force us to concede that Hunt was serving no fewer than three. "Don't worry," Hunt must have reassured all three of his superiors. "Don't worry. We're professionals."