

Is Howard Hughes Really Dead?

By Jack Anderson
and Les Whitten

Howard R. Hughes, the phantom billionaire, has been out of public sight for so long that the Internal Revenue Service may move to declare him legally dead.

Several federal agents, who have followed Hughes' movements, believe he is dead. As far back as Feb. 18, 1972, one agent declared in a speculative memo:

"It is my belief that Howard Hughes died in Las Vegas in 1970 and that key officials in charge of running his empire concealed this fact at the time in order to prevent a catastrophic dissolution of his holdings."

The memo suggests that a "double" could easily have been substituted for the real Hughes, since almost no one outside the recluse's inner circle has seen him in years. "The double no doubt has been schooled in Hughes' speech, mannerisms and eccentricities," the memo conjectures.

A pattern of "complete isolation" was established, with "only a few trusted servants" having direct access to Hughes, the memo notes. The next step, it suggests, was to move the supposed imposter "to a friendly foreign country." This would be necessary, in the agent's opinion, "to obviate the possibility of a government intrusion by search warrant."

Spokesmen for the \$2 billion Hughes financial empire call the speculation preposterous. They contend that

Hughes is quite alive, sound in both body and mind. He is now residing, they say, at the Princess Hotel in Acapulco, Mexico.

The U.S. government has a deep interest in Hughes' welfare. If he has departed this world unannounced, someone owes the Treasury tens of millions of dollars in estate taxes. Those responsible for the hoax would also be subject to prosecution.

For them, too, the stakes would be high. As the memo points out: "The power and financial benefits inuring to any group in control of a \$2 billion empire are manifest. The opportunities for the siphoning off of hundreds of millions of dollars are also obvious."

Alarmed over this possibility, House Monetary Affairs subcommittee Chairman Ben Rosenthal (D-N.Y.), has privately urged the IRS "to determine whether Howard Hughes still exists."

The IRS is reluctant to compel a showdown with Hughes without "reasonable" evidence of fraud. But if the billionaire refused to meet personally with IRS agents to prove he is alive, a case could be made to declare him legally dead.

Our associate, Bob Owens, has spent several weeks tracing Hughes' movements during the past six years. Here are the key findings:

• Sheriff Ralph Lamb investigated Hughes' sudden disappearance from Las Vegas on Thanksgiving eve, 1970. The investigation led to Dr. Harold L. Feikes, who had been summoned to Hughes' penthouse the previous month to give him blood transfusions. The

doctor warned that if Hughes had been taken anywhere except an intensive care unit, his life could be in danger, the sheriff told us. Feikes refused to comment.

• At the time Hughes left Las Vegas, he had seen no one outside his tight personal circle for more than a decade. During the next several months, a man purporting to be Hughes met face-to-face with half a dozen outsiders. The first was Turner B. Shelton, then the U.S. ambassador to Nicaragua, who described Hughes as "about 6 feet, 3 inches tall, very thin, weighing from 140 to 150 pounds, with graying hair and wearing a neatly trimmed Van Dyke type beard."

• The last known visitors to call on Hughes were Nevada's Gov. Mike O'Callaghan and Gaming Board Chairman Phil Hanniflin. They also described him as tall, thin and gray-bearded and found him fully alert. The meeting took place in London in March, 1973. No outsiders have visited him since that date, so far as we have been able to learn.

• Hughes has been able to travel from country to country without a valid passport. He reportedly lost his passport during the 1972 earthquake in Managua. His aides tried to obtain a replacement without submitting an up-to-date photo of Hughes. But this arrangement was rejected by passport director Frances Knight.

There is more to the Howard Hughes story, which we'll report in future columns.