



Justice (?) Dept. seeks Watergate deal

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WASHINGTON — The Justice Department is discreetly sounding out some of the defendants in the Watergate case about entering guilty pleas and settling the affair without a trial.

It's no secret the White House would like to avoid the embarrassment of a public trial, which would spread on the court records details that have been limited so far to newspaper accounts.

The trial, if it goes according to schedule, would also run just as President Nixon begins his final four years in office. He would like to

dominate the front pages with news of his plans and programs for the future. The last thing he wants to see are headline stories about White House complicity in the burglarizing and bugging of Democratic headquarters.

By pleading guilty, the defendants could avoid a public spectacle and save the White House embarrassment. The White House therefore, has taken a keen interest in preventing the case from ever coming to trial.

Our sources at the Justice Department expect six of the seven defendants to go along with a guilty plea if the conspiracy and other charges are

cut back enough. The lone holdout, our sources say, may be ex-White House aide Gordon Liddy. He's a tough-minded lawyer who would be disbarred if he pleads guilty to a felony.

Watergate Deal?

Members of the defense team cautiously confirmed that the government is at least working on a deal. One defense source said there had been "informal contacts" between the prosecution and defense. "There are always discussions like this in virtually every criminal case," he said, "the sort of thing that goes, 'What would you do if . . .'"

Another defense source said a more definite offer had been made to one defendant but had been turned down. Subtle probing has been going on for months, but no "hard discussions" have begun, the defense sources said.

None of the defense team would speak for attribution, however, except for Henry Rothblatt, attorney for one of the men caught at gunpoint inside Democratic headquarters. He denied any approach from the Justice Department. "So far," he said, "they haven't talked to me. I'm ready for the trial."

Meanwhile, the mystery deepens over who is paying for the legal expenses. All the defendants have high-

powered lawyers. Rothblatt is an imposing trial figure who literally wrote the book on modern criminal law.

Another defense lawyer, William Bittman, was formerly the Justice Department's star prosecutor who convicted both Teamsters boss Jimmy Hoffa and Senate wheeler-dealer Bobby Baker.

Another national celebrity on the defense team, Gerry Alch, is a partner of famed criminal lawyer F. Lee Bailey. Alch rivals Bailey in both fees and glory.

Who is paying for these high-powered, high-priced attorneys? We have spoken to some of the defendants who told us: "We were told when we took the job that we would be taken care of." They aren't paying their own legal bills, they acknowledged.

But no one — neither the defendants nor the lawyers — will say who is putting up the money.