

3-Man Panel To Check On Bellino

By Herbert H. Denton
Washington Post Staff Writer

A special three-man panel of the Senate select Watergate committee has been formed to look into charges that the committee's chief investigator, Carmine F. Bellino, attempted to hire persons to bug or wiretap Richard M. Nixon's hotel room in the 1960 presidential campaign, according to committee staff.

The allegations, which were made in three affidavits released July 24 by Republican National Committee Chairman George Bush, have been the topic of considerable behind-the-scenes partisan conflict.

Bellino promptly and heatedly denied the charges, calling them "absolutely false."

Sen. Sam J. Ervin Jr. (D-N.C.), chairman of the committee, reportedly regards the affidavits as flimsy and insubstantial and was said initially to have been prepared to do nothing in the way of investigating them. However, committee vice chairman Howard Baker (R-Tenn.) and 21 GOP senators pressed publicly for such an investigation.

The three members named to the subcommittee by Ervin and Baker are Sens. Herman Talmadge (D-Ga.), the panel's chairman; Edward J. Gurney (R-Fla.) and Daniel K. Inouye (D-Hawaii.)

Left unclear yesterday was what method or format the special panel would employ to investigate the charges against the committee's chief investigator.

Both Talmadge and Gurney said they would not have comments since neither had been formally notified that they were appointed to such a panel.

Despite the demands of 22 Senate Republicans in a letter to the Watergate committee, Bellino has not been suspended pending the outcome of the investigation, according to Rufus L. Edmisten, deputy chief counsel to the Watergate committee.

The three affidavits released by Bush came from two private investigators, Edward Murray Jones, who now lives in the Philippines; John W. Leon, who died 10 days before Bush's announcement; and Joseph W. Shimon, a retired Washington police detective.

The affidavits include charges that in 1960, while then Vice President Nixon was preparing for his televised debates with the Democratic presidential candidate, John F. Kennedy, Bellino attempted to recruit persons to bug Mr. Nixon's Washington hotel room.

The charges in the affidavits relating to Bellino are based partly on speculation and partly on disputed, second-hand evidence.

Bush, in releasing the affidavits, said he was "convinced that there is in fact substance to the allegations" but he added that he could not and would not "vouch for the veracity of the statements contained in the affidavits."

Edmisten termed the affidavits "about the poorest excuse I have seen, as a lawyer, in trying to prove the facts."

Since the Watergate Committee's responsibility is to investigate the 1972 presidential campaign, technically the only justification for looking into the charges relating to the 1960 campaign would stem from the fact that Bellino is an employee of the committee.

Some Republicans have made no secret of their desire to find something to balance, at least in part, the revelations of the committee.

Bush himself said the purpose of releasing the affidavits was not "to justify Watergate" but in the interest of "fair play."