

\$100,000 Donation And Air West Deal



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PHANTOM BILLIONAIRE Howard Hughes went through the back door of the White House in 1969 to gain presidential approval for his purchase of Air West.

Because the airline is an international carrier, with routes to Canada and Mexico, the sale had to have President Nixon's OK.

The backdoor approach was made by Richard Danner, a Hughes hotelman, to the President's sidekick, Bebe Rebozo. Despite Hughes' poor management of Trans World Airlines, the Civil Aeronautics Board approved the Air West deal on June 15, 1969. Mr. Nixon signed the papers six days later.

Not long afterward, \$50,000 from a Hughes gambling casino was slipped to Rebozo by Danner. Still another \$50,000 was passed from Danner to Rebozo the following summer.

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SOURCES close to Robert Maheu, who headed Hughes' Nevada operation in those days, have told us about the secret payments.

Danner was chosen to seek Rebozo's intervention in the Air West acquisition, they say, because the two men had known each other in Miami.

Later, at Hughes' behest, Maheu instructed Danner to hand over \$50,000 to Rebozo. Maheu insisted the money was intended not as a bribe but as a belated

contribution to Mr. Nixon's 1968 campaign.

The second \$50,000 payoff was made in Maheu's presence. He claimed this was a donation to the 1970 congressional campaign.

A White House spokesman denied that Mr. Nixon ever received the \$100,000 from Hughes. Neither Rebozo nor Danner could be reached for comment.

Investigators for the Senate Watergate Committee are trying to trace what happened to the money after it reached Rebozo. Sources close to Rebozo would say only that he has never diverted campaign money into his own or the President's personal projects.

There is also interest in the Danner-Rebozo dealings at the Securities and Exchange Commission, which is secretly investigating Hughes' acquisition of Air West.

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MY ASSOCIATE, George Clifford, flew to Vancouver, B.C., last week, where he located John Meier, a former Hughes consultant, who contended that the President's brother, Donald Nixon, had also played a role in the Air West deal.

This is the same brother who stirred up a national controversy by borrowing \$205,000 from Hughes in 1956 and putting up only a \$13,000 lot as collateral. Although he never paid back the loan and embarrassed his famous brother, Don Nixon continued to promote business deals with the Hughes organization.