

# Business With U.S. --Campaign Funds



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**C**ONFIDENTIAL Senate Watergate documents show that salty-tongued Federal Maritime chairwoman Helen Bentley collected at least \$20,000 in donations for the Nixon campaign from the shipping industry she is supposed to regulate.

The documents describe Ms. Bentley's dealings with the veteran shipper, Captain Leo Berger, a partner in Avon Steamships of Lake Success, Long Island. Both were interviewed by committee investigators in recent weeks.

A summary of Ms. Bentley's brief interview with committee sleuth William Mayton reports: "He asked her a few times in many different ways if she ever solicited money for the 1972 campaign and she always responded negatively."

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**W**HEN BERGER was cross-examined, however, he confessed that he and his partner, Peter Constat, gave "\$20,000 in cash to Ms. Bentley which she gave to Stans." Former Commerce Secretary Maurice Stans was President Nixon's chief fund raiser and is now under criminal indictment in the campaign contributions case of financier Robert Vesco.

The summary quotes Ms. Bentley as telling the Senate Watergate staff that "the Avon Shipping Company had no business before her" when she passed the campaign hat. "They gave her the money because they knew that she was a Republican," and they wanted the money, according to the summary of her testimony, "to go to the GOP."

The truth is that Avon, like most shipping companies, did have business before the Federal Maritime Commission. Such firms must get certification from the commission, under Ms. Bentley, that they have the financial means to pay for cleaning up any oil spills.

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**W**E REACHED Ms. Bentley, who explained yeastily that she had told the committee staff about the certification question herself and could not understand why it was left out of the summary of her interview.

At Avon, Captain Berger defended the chairwoman, saying there had been no solicitation. His campaign contribution, he said, "was voluntary." Then he added brusquely: "I said everything I'm going to say before the committee. Good night."

Despite the gruff sea captain's modesty about his contributions, our investigation backs up the Watergate committee's finding. The records of secret cash contributions to the Nixon campaign show a "Captain Leo Berger" and "Peter Constat," both listed at Avon's Lake Success address, each gave \$10,000.

**Footnote:** In September 1970, we reported how Ms. Bentley was asked by then Vice President Spiro Agnew to pass the hat in shipping circles for an Agnew crony running for Governor of Maryland. Dutifully, she contacted about 10 "top echelon shipping executives," she admitted.