

Huges Papers Reveal Eccentricities

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We have obtained Xerox copies of the Howard Hughes papers, which the Watergate burglars had planned to steal from the safe of Las Vegas publisher Hank Greenspun.

The two-inch thick stash of documents, most of them in Hughes' own hand scrawl, add little to what is already known about the undercover relationship between the reclusive billionaire and President Nixon.

But the papers offer a fascinating self-portrait of America's celebrated mystery man. From his memos, Hughes is revealed as an eccentric tycoon, obsessed with secrecy, who hatched multi-million-dollar power grabs and thought he could manipulate the nation's political leaders.

From 1966 to 1970, he ruled his financial empire from the guarded penthouse of a Las Vegas hotel-casino, communicating with his executives by memo and telephone. He wouldn't let his wife near him, then mourned the breakup of their marriage, blaming it upon an innocent aide.

We reported a small part of the story in August, 1971, after getting a dozen handwritten Hughes memos. We wrote that Hughes ordered aides to offer financial backing to both presidential candidates in the 1968 election. But he expected Richard Nixon to win "under our sponsorship and supervision," as Hughes put it, "every inch of the way."

The billionaire also had cash to spare for the most lowly poli-

tician who might be in a position to help the Hughes interest. After typical instructions from Hughes, his former top hand, Robert Maheu, once reassured him: "As to the political leaders in Los Angeles, Howard, we take very good care of them throughout the year."

Hughes plunged into each new financial scheme with a passion. "Please clear the decks and fasten your seat belt," he scribbled to Maheu on April 19, 1968, "because I have a blockbuster." It was a plan to trade the Stardust for the International Hotel in Las Vegas.

The memos show that Hughes often became so absorbed with his schemes that he lost all track of day and night. "I suppose you know I have not been to sleep at all, he wrote Maheu on April 24, 1968. "So I am going to sit up now until we hear something."

The phantom billionaire repeatedly insisted upon total secrecy. He didn't want "the most microscopic chance of the slightest hint being accidentally dropped to anyone," stressed a typical memo. Another time, he declared that his informants "put their very lives in jeopardy with some of the disclosures they make to me, and if they thought this information went to anybody—no matter whom—they would not continue to inform me."

Hughes kept his last wife, movie actress Jean Peters, on a yo-yo string. He would disappear for long stretches and send her endearing but false mes-

sages through his aide William Gay. Once he directed aides to rent a motel suite on the Mojave Desert and installed private telephones for the sole purpose of convincing his wife he was out on the desert. Yet all the time, he was only a few miles from their Bel Air, Calif., home, watching endless movies and eating chocolate bars at a private studio.

In 1965 he promised to have Thanksgiving dinner with her. But because of his fear of germs, he told her to sit across the room from him. She walked out in a huff.

The following year, he persuaded her to join him in Boston where he promised they would settle down. But again, he kept her at across-the-room distance. She put up with it for three days.

But when the marriage broke up, he blamed Gay who had merely carried the messages back and forth. Hughes complained bitterly: "Bill's total indifference and laxity to my pleas for help in my domestic area, voiced urgently to him, week by week through the past 7 to 8 years, have resulted in a complete, I am afraid irrevocable loss of my wife. I am sorry but I blame Bill completely for this unnecessary debacle."

Maheu tried to defend Gay, contending: "Bill Gay came forward when everyone else collapsed and was ready to protect you to the hilt." But Hughes complained angrily from his hermitage atop the hotel-casino: "I thought that when we came here, and I told you not to

invite Bill up here and not to permit him to be privy to our activities, you had realized that I no longer trusted him."

For that matter, the memos show that the relationship between Hughes and Maheu was stormy. Most of their quarrels were over petty matters. A clash over office space, for example, brought Maheu to the brink of resigning in early February, 1968.

"Last week," wrote Maheu in a "Very Conf." note to the industrialist, "you mentioned to me that there are times you get the feeling that, I think you have been in this world for 12 years instead of 62. I sometimes get the feeling that you think I am still in my mother's womb rather than being 50 years of age."

But the quarrels would end in reconciliation, with expressions of fidelity to one another. On May 6, 1968, Hughes wrote to his subordinate:

Now, Bob, it is my intention to remove as many as possible of the irritating features of our relationship. In this connection, I have decided not to ask you to write me any more messages in longhand and sealed envelopes. I know this is time consuming for you, and my men think I don't trust them. So, in the future except in rare instances, I prefer you dictate your reply to my messages via telephone and whichever of my men happens to be on duty."

Two years later the two men broke up and they are fighting out their differences in court. William Gay, on the other hand, is now a trusted member of Hughes' entourage.