

# Honest Mayor Refuses Mafia Bribe

By Jack Anderson

All politicians shouldn't be tarnished by the misdeeds of a few power-hungry men who flaunted the law while they basked in the sunshine of Key Biscayne and San Clemente.

The stories should be written, too, of the honorable politicians—men like the courageous, small-town mayor who turned down a \$500,000 bribe and risked the wrath of the Mafia rather than compromise his integrity.

His name, Burt Ross, deserves a big headline.

The 31-year-old mayor of Fort Lee, N.J., in the heart of Mafia country, allegedly was offered \$500,000 to help obtain zoning variances for a multimillion-dollar commercial complex.

Ross reported the bribe offer to the FBI, which asked him to go ahead with the arrangements but to wear a hidden listening device.

On May 26, he met two local developers at the Paramus restaurant. One of them pushed a thick, manila envelope across the table at him. It was stuffed with \$100,000 in small bills, the first of five installments—more money than the young mayor had ever seen.

Outside in the parking lot, the FBI was tuned in. The two developers were subpoenaed and indicted five days later for conspiracy to commit bribery.

But the drama was only begin-

ning. Ross received a phone call at his home the morning of May 31 from Joseph Diaco, one of the two men at the restaurant rendezvous.

Allegedly, he growled meaningfully that he had just received a grand jury subpoena, and he threatened the mayor's life. It was not a threat to be taken lightly because Diaco, according to official records, is on close terms with the Mafia family of Ruggiero (Ritchie the Boot) Boiardo.

The FBI placed Ross and his wife Laurie under protective custody. The mayor now runs his town in exile, moving from place to place with a troop of federal bodyguards. He keeps in touch with his associates, family and friends by telephone only, his whereabouts known only to the feds.

What do the good citizens of Fort Lee, N.J., pay their mayor for this kind of honest service? He turned down a \$500,000 bribe, all in untraceable cash, for a \$5,000-a-year salary.

Footnote: We're awarding Mayor Burt Ross our brass ring, good for one free ride on the Washington Merry-Go-Round.

The Silbert Story—The chief of the original Watergate prosecution team, Earl J. Silbert, is under fire on Capitol Hill for his handling of the case.

Sen. Sam J. Ervin Jr. (D-N.C.) is suspicious that Silbert concentrated on convicting the Watergate burglars and didn't

press the prosecution of their White House superiors.

We had the same suspicion during the early Watergate developments. But our investigation has now established that the Silbert team deserves most of the credit for cracking the Watergate case.

It is true, as we repeatedly warned before the January, 1973, trial of the Watergate Seven, that the White House was trying to buy their silence. In return for pleading guilty and keeping silent, they were paid living expenses and legal fees.

This was supplemented on the eve of the trial with a \$1,000-a-month offer. The payments to the defendants, we reported, "were funneled through (E. Howard) Hunt."

The White House strategy was to convene a grand jury to preempt the Senate Watergate hearings. The President hoped to control and contain the investigation by confining it behind the closed doors of the grand jury. This would also provide an excuse for the White House to refuse comment on Watergate questions.

Our stories about the President's strategy have now been confirmed by the White House transcripts. These also show that the President planned to leak self-serving information from the secret grand jury proceedings. "Well, we could easily do that," said the President to his former staff chief, H. R.

Haldeman. "Leak out certain stuff. We could pretty much control that."

Instead, we obtained the grand jury transcripts and put out the straight story, upsetting the White House strategy.

But it was the original Watergate prosecutors, more than anyone else, who thwarted the White House cover-up. After wiretapper James McCord gave them their first break, the prosecutors immediately hauled the tight-lipped G. Gordon Liddy back before the grand jury.

Although Liddy told them nothing, they deliberately kept him in the grand jury room and gave the impression he might be talking. Afterwards, the press surged around the emerging prosecutors to find out what Liddy had said. They responded with a sly "no comment," which was calculated to unnerve Liddy's superiors in the White House.

The ploy worked, and John Dean contacted the prosecutors to make a deal. They pumped him for information during late-night sessions in the Rockville, Md., offices of his attorney. Then they broke down Magruder, who had lied during the earlier trial.

In the end, the Silbert team broke the back of the case and left a 90-page summary that has served as a blueprint for the special prosecutors who succeeded them.

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