

Ex-Prosecutor Bittman Under U.S. Scrutiny

By Timothy S. Robinson
Washington Post Staff Writer

William O. Bittman, a Washington lawyer who was credited as a federal prosecutor with sending former Senate aide Robert G. (Bobby) Baker and union leader James R. Hoffa to jail, yesterday found himself the object of a prosecutor's scrutiny.

Watergate special prosecutors made public a memo given to Bittman by a client in November, 1972, in which the client—convicted Watergate conspirator E. Howard Hunt Jr.—made demands for more money in connection with continuing the Watergate cover-up. Bittman had denied under oath ever receiving the money.

Off and on for the past 1½ years, Bittman's name has cropped up in connection with what some attorneys saw as highly unusual practices in connection with Hunt's defense. Watergate witnesses told of delivering large sums of cash to Bittman for payment to Hunt, supposedly paid in return for Hunt's continued silence.

Convicted Watergate conspirator Frederick C. LaRue testified, for example, that he transferred a total of \$210,000 to Bittman over a period of several months.

With each new charge, Bittman would deny any knowledge that the payments represented "hush money." They were, he said, for legal fees.

That story, according to government sources, was the version that he gave under oath to the Watergate grand jury and to two congressional committees probing the Watergate affair.

As a result, Bittman faces possible prosecution, according to informed government sources.

Bittman was also subpoenaed to bring certain materials to the Senate Watergate committee last year, informed committee sources said yesterday. The memo that Hunt delivered to Bittman and which was made public at the Watergate trial yesterday—in which Hunt makes demands for more money and threatens to tell of other illegal activities by the White House if the money is not paid—was not among the documents he delivered.

Failure to comply with a congressional subpoena is a federal crime under contempt of Congress statutes.

Bittman was only 32 years

old when at the last moment he replaced the suddenly ill chief prosecutor in the Hoffa case, going on to win a conviction two months later.

From that case in Chicago, he moved to Washington and three years later took charge of the government's prosecution of Baker. After winning a conviction against Baker for tax evasion, Bittman left the government for private practice, joining the law firm to Hogan and Hartson, one of the larger and most prestigious firms in Washington.

He left Hogan and Hartson last June, giving no reason for doing so but saying that "it was a voluntary decision on my part." He continues to practice law here.

After being hired by Hunt

and representing him in the first trial, Bittman's participation in the Watergate affair remained largely uncontroversial.

Then, in May 1973, convicted Watergate conspirator James W. McCord Jr. raised Bittman's name in connection with what McCord regarded as "political pressure" on him to plead guilty to the charges growing out of the Watergate raid in exchange for executive clemency.

Bittman was named in the Watergate cover-up indictment as an unindicted conspirator who showed up in seven overt acts, most of them dealing with his receipt of funds.

Informed sources said at the time that Bittman escaped prosecution because there was no proof that he knew the purpose of the funds and because he would be more useful as a government witness. Prosecutors said yesterday that the new document "definitely would have a bearing" on whether to reconsider that decision.

Bittman has said previously that he never knowingly passed along money through Hunt to the other Watergate conspirators.

"If I had any suspicion anywhere along the line that my client was being influenced by outside factors," Bittman said, "I would have withdrawn from the case."

Attempts to reach Bittman yesterday afternoon were unsuccessful.

Bittman, 43, is a native of Milwaukee who attended law school at Marquette University and DePaul University.



By Linda Wheeler—The Washington Post
Washington lawyer William O. Bittman outside court.