

Shippers Tapped for Nixon Funds

By Jack Anderson

Confidential 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 Mrs. 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 Mrs. 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."

When Berger was cross-examined, however, he confessed that he and his partner, Peter Conostas, gave "\$20,000 in cash to Mrs. 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 Mrs.

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 Mrs. Bentley that they have financial means to pay for cleaning up any oil spills.

We reached Mrs. 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. Goodnight."

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 Conostas," both listed at Avon's Lake Success address, each gave \$10,000.

Footnote: In September, 1970, we reported how Mrs. 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 ten "top echelon shipping executives," she admitted.

Intelligence Digest—Intelligence reports warn that the Kremlin has been pressuring the Arab nations to nationalize western oil holdings. The reports suggest that the Soviets may hope to start tapping the Arab oil fields for themselves, because their own oil fields in rugged Siberia are becoming increasingly difficult to develop. . . . Diplomatic reports indicate that the NATO allies may be closing ranks after their initial shock over the Arab oil embargo. At first, the NATO partners began scrambling for themselves for vital oil supplies. But allied leaders, apparently, have suddenly been

jolted into recognizing the danger of dividing the West. Quiet new moves have been made to restore more consultation and cooperation. . . . One intelligence report tells of an exchange between the cease-fire negotiators, Israel's Maj. Gen. Ahron Yariv and Egypt's Lt. Gen. Mohamed Gamasi. Yariv asked whether they should turn the negotiations over to civilians. Gamasi readily agreed. "Tomorrow," he said, "let us return in civilian clothes. . . . A State Department telegram, intended for official eyes only, reveals how the U.S. has been aiding the nation that has cut off our oil. The U.S. has established a military logistical support system for Saudi Arabia. Because the Saudi army hasn't developed "the required degree of expertise" to manage the system, states the telegram, "limited U.S. (government's) assistance will be required." . . . Intelligence reports quote Saudi Arabian leaders as saying one reason for the oil boycott was to break what they believed to be the Zionist hold on the U.S. press and bring the Arab story forcibly to the attention of the American public.