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More behind-scenes effort in drive for Watergate guilty

WASHINGTON — We can now shed more light on the backstage efforts to persuade the Watergate defendants to plead guilty and save the White House the embarrassment of a public trial.

On Dec. 23, we reported that the Justice Department had discreetly sounded out some of the defendants about entering guilty pleas. The prosecutors were cautious in their conversations with defense lawyers. But more direct messages were relayed through E. Howard Hunt, the former White House aide and CIA veteran.

AT FIRST the defendants held out for a softening of the charges. The five who were caught inside Democratic headquarters, for example, wanted the break-in charge reduced to illegal entry. This would have made their offense a simple misdemeanor.

Any cutting back of the charges, however, would have looked like a fix. So instead, the mystery men behind the scenes used pressure and persuasion. They also alternately stopped and resumed the cash payments that had been promised to the defendants.

In return, the defendants hinted they might make some embarrassing revelations if they were abandoned. Some indicated they might write books



about their experiences, telling all.

Hunt agreed to plead guilty, apparently with a tacit understanding that he wouldn't have to spend too long in jail. He urged the other defendants privately to follow his example.

SOME OF the defendants, who had been involved with Hunt in the Day of Pigs operation, also received private visits from some of their former CIA comrades. The visitors brought expense money and also offered to make regular payments to the defendants' families. A \$1,000-a-month figure was mentioned.

Our sources could not, or would not, identify the men behind the scenes. We can report only that most of the money for the defendants was funneled through Hunt. He delivered part of the cash to Bernard Barker, who distributed it to the men he had recruited for the Watergate misadventure. Hunt's wife was carrying \$10,000 in cash when she was killed in a Chicago airplane crash.

Excerpted: At the outset of the trial, the prosecutors made

a remarkable agreement to introduce the most evidence the FBI had. This was a detailed diary of one of the defendants, A. Martinez, mid-level CIA functionary for the was required by the keep a record of his activities. Those who have had access to the diary, however, Martinez, in true CIA fashion used code names to identify his contacts and assignments. Nevertheless, the diary provides an excellent record of the espionage operation at Watergate.