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Ashland Oil Head Admits Illegal Gift

By Morton Mintz
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The chairman of Ashland Oil, Inc., acknowledged yesterday that he had made illegal campaign contributions of \$100,000 in cash to the Finance Committee to Re-elect the President.

The executive, Orin E. Atkins, was the second in the past two weeks to admit giving corporate funds. The first was George A. Spater, chairman of American Airlines.

Atkins released a statement saying he had told special Watergate prosecutor Archibald Cox of the contribution and intends "to fully cooperate" with Cox's office in any further investigation. A special grand jury to investigate campaign corruption was authorized Thursday, at Cox's request.

Cox confirmed that Atkins and his company have "voluntarily acknowledged illegal corporate contributions." Neither he nor the company gave details.

"The facts indicate that the \$100,000 contribution was solicited and delivered to Maurice H. Stans, chairman of the Finance Committee to Re-elect the President," Cox said.

But Atkins said the committee "was not told that corporate funds were involved. When advised of this fact, the finance committee returned the contribution to the company."

Atkins, in a statement released at company head-

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quarters in Ashland, Ky., said that the contribution "was made without the knowledge of the board of directors and was extremely regrettable."

The delivery apparently was made before April 7, 1972, when the election-financing disclosure law took effect. Cox and the company were vague on this point, both saying the cash was turned over "in early April, 1972."

Atkins also said the money was given by "a subsidiary." This was identified by attorney Fred M. Vinson Jr. as the Ashland Petroleum Gabon Corp.

In a letter dated last Monday, Vinson, who said he was representing Atkins, Mrs. Atkins and the subsidiary, told the finance committee that the money belonged to the Gabon Corp., not the couple, although they were listed as the donors.

In requesting a refund, Vinson said his inquiries "have also revealed that the Nixon finance committee was not informed and had no way of knowing that this contribution originated from a corporate source." The refund was made the same day.

Atkins could not be reached. His firm's Washington vice president, William J. Hull, and Washington counsel, Harry D. Williams, declined to elaborate. So did Cox's office. Cox, in a statement, noted that corporate contributions to political campaigns violate the federal criminal code.

"We are in no position to make any determination until the details of the contribution and surrounding circumstances have been fully investigated," Cox said.

The prosecutor repeated an earlier hint that corporation executives who own up quickly to illegal contributions may be spared prosecution even if their companies are not.

"When corporate officers come forward voluntarily and early to disclose illegal political contributions to candidates of either party, their voluntary acknowledgment will be considered as mitigating circumstances in deciding what charges to bring," Cox said.

Cox used identical language on July 7 in commenting on the voluntary acknowledgment by American Airlines' Spater that he had given \$55,000 in corporate funds.

Spater was solicited by Herbert W. Kalmbach, President Nixon's personal attorney. The company has said that Kalmbach did not ask for corporate money and that the finance committee, which recently refunded the \$55,000, did not know the contribution was illegal.

Ashland Oil in 1971 was listed by Fortune magazine as the nation's 70th largest industrial corporation in terms of sales (\$1,780,003), 93d in assets (\$1,275,002), and 87th in net income (\$68.3 million). Its net income in the first quarter of 1973 was \$15.9 million, 46.7 per cent more than in the same period of 1972.