

Dead or Alive?

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HOWARD R. HUGHES, the phantom billionaire, has been out of public sight for so long that the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) may move to declare him legally dead.

Several federal agents, who have followed Hughes' movements, believe he is dead. As far back as Feb. 18, 1972, one agent declared in a speculative memo:

"It is my belief that Howard Hughes died in Las Vegas in 1970 and that key officials in charge of running his empire concealed this fact at the time in order to prevent a catastrophic dissolution of his holdings."

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THE MEMO suggests that a "double" could easily have been substituted for the real Howard Hughes. A pattern of "complete isolation" was established, with "only a few trusted servants" having direct access to Hughes, notes the memo.

"The next step, it suggests, was to move the supposed imposter "to a friendly foreign country." This would be necessary, in the agent's opinion, "to obviate the possibility of a government intrusion by search warrant."

The danger of exposing the masquerade would have lessened, adds the memo, "with the passage of time and the double's isolation from any outsiders who knew the real Hughes."

This scenario has not been dismissed in Washington as complete fantasy. Other government investiga-

tors also suspect that the eccentric billionaire may be dead.

Spokesmen for the \$2 billion Hughes financial empire call the speculation preposterous. They contend that the elusive Hughes is quite alive, sound in both body and mind. He is now residing, they say, at the Princess Hotel in Acapulco.

The government has a deep interest in Hughes' welfare. If he has departed this world unannounced, someone owes the Treasury tens of millions of dollars in estate taxes. Those responsible for the hoax would also be subject to prosecution.

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FOR THEM, too, the stakes would be high. As the memo points out: "The power and financial benefits inuring to any group in control of a \$2 billion empire are manifest. The opportunities for the siphoning off of hundreds of millions of dollars are also obvious."

Alarmed over this possibility, House Monetary Affairs Chairman Ben Rosenthal, (Dem-N.Y.), has privately urged the IRS "to determine whether Howard Hughes still exists."

The IRS is reluctant to compel a showdown with Hughes without "reasonable" evidence of fraud. But if the billionaire refused to meet personally with IRS agents to prove he is alive, a case could be made to declare him legally dead.