

Hughes, Watergate



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THE BIGGEST Watergate mystery of them all has never been cleared up. What was Howard Hughes' strange role in the scandal?

The late millionaire was the only major Watergate figure who eluded the special prosecutors to the end. Yet some Watergate investigators believe he was the cause of the Watergate break-in.

His man in Washington, Robert Bennett, kept turning up mysteriously throughout the Watergate plot. White House informer John Dean commented that Bennett "became as mysterious in his inconspicuous presence as Howard Hughes was in his conspicuous absence."

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WE HAVE searched Hughes' private papers, now in federal custody, for clues. The papers show that the phantom millionaire followed the Watergate investigation avidly. For example, he demanded an immediate report from his attorney, Chester Davis, on White House counsel Fred Buzhardt's secret testimony before the Senate Watergate Committee.

Davis responded in a May 8, 1974, memo: "I am informed that Buzhardt (a) effectively asserted the attorney-client privilege, and (b) did not testify to anything relating to (you). The transcript of those hearings are secret, and it may be some time before I can get more detailed information."

In other memos, Davis confided that he was on good terms with "Sen. Sam" as he called Senate Watergate Chairman Sam Ervin, (Dem-N.C.), and

that he was "cooperating" with attorneys for Bebe Rebozo, the sidekick of then-President Richard Nixon.

Hughes sympathized completely with Nixon during the Watergate investigation, and the men around him tended, in the way of subordinates, to reflect his views. "Since the Watergate incident," wrote Davis, "there has been a bitterly fanatic political movement to destroy Nixon."

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THERE is a hint in the documents that the recluse considered emerging from his turtleshell but was persuaded by his attorney to pull his neck back inside because of the Watergate publicity. For instance, Hughes sent this message to Chester Davis on April 10, 1974:

"He (Hughes) wants to know immediately what prompted you to tell him to please continue his so-called reclusive way of life and not to cause any publicity. He said he has to make some decisions in Nevada . . . and he can't, or doesn't dare, arrive at any conclusion after what you told him yesterday."

In response, Davis cited not only Watergate but other legal problems as his reasons for "recommending that we do not invite additional unnecessary publicity." Later, he reported on his efforts to identify "the persons behind this determined effort to embarrass you in order to compel you to appear."

Unhappily, the Hughes papers merely heighten the mystery of Hughes' involvement in the Watergate scandal.