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Personality in the news

With Wirephotos

By KEN GEFFERT

Associated Press Writer

MIAMI, Fla. AP - Richard Gerstein took only casual notice when police nabbed five men inside Democratic national headquarters in Washington's Watergate complex June 17.

But nearly three months after the event, the veteran state attorney has found himself in the stormy center of the politically sensitive case even though the scene of the alleged crime is 1,100 miles outside his jurisdiction.

Gerstein, 48, says he is involved because the five Watergate suspects have moved in and out of his south Florida territory. His only interest is determining if the break-in involved violations of Florida law, he says.

Gerstein, a Democrat, won his party's nomination Sept. 12 for a fifth consecutive four-year term. He faces no Republican opposition in the November general election. He claims his probe is nonpolitical and bristles at suggestions that his disclosures in the case are designed only to grab headlines.

"Our disclosures have prompted other agencies into taking more expeditious action and prevented them from sweeping it under the rug until after the November election and then writing off the break-in as some prank," he said in a recent interview.

Gerstein first disclosed that checks totaling \$114,000 from the Republican campaign committee turned up in the Miami bank account of Bernard L. Barker, one of the five Watergate suspects.

Gerstein's then disclosed he had testimony from a Miami commercial photographer which indicated that correspondence between Democratic leaders was secretly filmed at least a week before the Watergate break-in.

While his probe has thrust him into the limelight, Gerstein has found it also leaves him open to attack.

Eugene Spellman, a former Gerstein assistant and one of three Democrats who opposed him in the primary election, charged that the incumbent state attorney was "meddling in the federal investigation of the Watergate incident to gain political headlines."

Gerstein garnered more than 50 per cent of the vote against Spellman and his other two Democratic foes to avoid a runoff. Gerstein has become accustomed to both publicity and criticism since he surfaced as a major political power in Florida with an upset victory in the 1956 race for Dade County state attorney.

After winning his first election as a war hero who guided his Air Force bomber crew to safety although blinded in his right eye, Gerstein became the leading Democratic vote-getter in Dade County during each of his three successive races for re-election.

He prosecuted the Mossler murder case in Miami when Candance Mossler and her nephew, Melvin Lane Powers, were acquitted on a charge they murdered her multimillionaire husband for his money.

For his investigation of organized crime in south Florida, Gerstein says his life has been threatened.

Gerstein was put under police protection in 1967 when the Wackenhut detective agency reported the underworld had let a contract for Gerstein's murder. The detective agency was then spearheading former Gov. Claude Kirk's "war on crime."

This spring Gerstein first said he would abandon the post he had held for 16 years and run for a newly created congressional seat. Then he changed his mind and announced his candidacy for the state senate.

Finally, three weeks after he launched his Watergate probe on July 1, Gerstein told 75 staff members that he had reconsidered again and decided to seek re-election to his \$34,000-a-year job.

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