

Watergate Guilty Pleas

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Washington

After firing their attorney, four defendants in the Watergate bugging trial changed their innocent pleas to guilty yesterday while another unsuccessfully sought a mistrial.

Attorney Gerald Alch, representing former CIA agent James W. McCord Jr., requested a mistrial at the start of the afternoon session, arguing that Judge John J. Sirica should have dropped defendant E. Howard Hunt from the case before he appeared before the jury.

On Thursday, Hunt changed his plea from innocent to guilty. Thus only two defendants — G. Gordon Liddy, former White House aide, and McCord — are left to stand trial.

Sirica dismissed the mistrial request after a brief argument by attorneys for both sides. He told Alch "there is no merit to your position."

The defense attorney objected to the fact that Hunt appeared before the jury — as did all the other defendants — before he was allowed to plead guilty. After his plea was changed, the jury was told without explanation not to consider Hunt's case.

The judge devoted the

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morning session to hearing the change of pleas and questioning the four defendants.

One of them, Frank Sturgis, shed some light on the reason for the alleged bugging of the Democratic National Committee Watergate headquarters last June 17 when he admitted he was involved because "we are very concerned about communism and Cuba. When there is a threat of a Communist conspiracy against the United States I will do anything to stop it." He did not elaborate.

The four defendants fired attorney Henry B. Rothblatt of New York after he refused to condone their change of plea. The judge promptly named attorney Alvin Newmyer of Washington to represent Sturgis, Bernard L. Barker, Eugenio Martinez and Virgilio Gonzalez.

Questioned by the judge, the four denied they had ever been threatened or promised anything in return for changing their plea. It had been reported in the press that they had been promised that their families would be "taken care of" if they pleaded guilty.

Rothblatt, talking to reporters after his dismissal said he was "hopeful some wealthy people in the Cuban community" would come to the aid of the four Miami men.

The charges of conspiracy, wiretap and burglary which could carry sentences up to 15 years on each count and \$10,000 in fines.

Sirica said that he would withhold sentencing of the four until he received a probation officer's report.

Meanwhile, they were being held in jail under \$100,000 bond each.

Sturgis, Martinez and Gonzalez told the judge that they worked for Barker in his Miami real estate operation. They said they had been paid only expenses for their trip to Washington and when asked if they ever worked for the CIA all replied "not that I know of."

MAIL

Barker said he had received \$25,000 in the mail "in a plain unmarked envelope" which he assumed was to be used to conduct "the operation we were involved in."

Asked by the judge if he didn't think it strange that so much cash should come through the mail without identification, Barker replied, "I didn't think it was strange because I was previously involved in operations such as this which took the strangeness out of it."

"Where did you get that expense money?" Sirica asked Barker.

"I got it in a plain envelope," Barker replied.

"I'm sorry, I don't believe you," Sirica told him.

Martinez, Sturgis and Gonzalez all indicated that they had become involved with the case because of their earlier fight against communism in Cuba.