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The Legal Tiger of the Watergate Affair

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WHOMEVER is paying the stiff legal fees of E. Howard Hunt Jr. has bought a courtroom tiger.

Hunt's lawyer, William O. Bitman, 41, soared to fame as the tough, aggressive prosecutor who sent Senate aide Bobby Baker and Teamster president James Hoffa to jail.

Now a highly paid private lawyer, Bitman represents defendant Hunt in the sensational Watergate case. Bitman's plea of "guilty" in Hunt's behalf was a bombshell.

In his first interview since taking the case, Bitman, a burly six-footer and one-time Marquette University linebacker, puffed a cigar and said, "I'm not trying to throw the government any bones, but their case is formidable. It's difficult to defend."

He admitted the circumstances were "very suspicious" when five men were apprehended attempting to burglarize and bug the head-

quarters of the Democratic National Committee in the Watergate.

Hunt, a former CIA operative, White House consultant and author of spy novels, was indicted as a ring-leader in the conspiracy.

Bitman termed the government's investigation "exhaustive. They pulled no punches. The grand jury even called wives and children. That's very unusual. Mrs. Hunt and two of their children appeared."

In another shocking development, Mrs. Hunt was killed recently in an airplane crash. Her purse was found to contain a mysterious \$10,000 in cash.

"Her death was the catalyst," Bitman said. "Mr. Hunt just didn't feel emotionally and physically able to go through a lengthy trial."

Bitman has worked nights and weekends since last summer preparing for the case. His wife Carole and their seven children have seen little of him.

"I've been so damn busy I haven't even had a chance to get a haircut for three weeks," he said.

In reviewing the Watergate case, Bitman charged:

- The news media have been guilty of inaccuracy and "flexible ethical standards," saddling Hunt with "massive prejudicial publicity."

- President Nixon's counsel, John Dean, "illegally" searched Hunt's locked desk and safe in the White House offices. Bitman is still trying to get back its contents.

- Telephone conversations between Bitman and Hunt have been tapped.

Like the Bobby Baker case, to which President Lyndon Johnson was linked, the Watergate is supersensitive for Nixon's White House.

The Watergate case is putting Bitman to the test.

Hunt's plea of "guilty" — followed by similar pleas by four other Watergate defendants — means full disclosure of what happened may never occur.

Bitman's visibility will grow as he steers Hunt over the next three hurdles:

- He will move to get Hunt's sentence suspended.
- He will defend Hunt in a pending million-dollar civil suit filed by the Democrats.
- He'll be at Hunt's elbow if and when he testifies at a forthcoming Senate probe of the Watergate affair.