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Watergate Payment Allegation

By Jack Anderson

In secret testimony before the grand jury, Watergate defendant James McCord has confided that his co-conspirator, Howard Hunt, last July feared the President's campaign chiefs were abandoning them and wrote a three-page letter demanding "to contact someone in the White House."

Thereafter, money allegedly was delivered to Hunt's attorney, William O. Bittman, for distribution to the defendants. Mrs. Hunt, acting as the courier, arranged to meet McCord at various places and slip him cash payments. McCord testified that he received around \$45,000 after the Watergate break-in for "salary" and legal expenses.

The grand jury is trying to track down who authorized the payments and whether the money was intended to buy the defendants' silence. Bribery to obstruct justice, of course, is a serious federal violation.

As McCord related it to the grand jury, he received a phone call around July 20 from Hunt. "He asked me," said McCord, "to go to a pay phone away from the house."

'Afraid We Might Talk'

"He felt the Committee to Re-elect the President (was) trying to do him in and to do us in for good and to put us away and abandon us. This

was his, almost his exact words.

"And he said that he was going to do, well, he said words to the effect that he was going to now assume a leadership role in dealing with the committee." McCord said he, too, felt "they were more interested in keeping us in jail than they were in getting us out, because they were afraid we might talk."

McCord later learned from Mrs. Hunt that her husband had written a three-page letter which was read to the campaign committee's attorney, Kenneth W. Parkinson. Recounted McCord: "She said that when Bittman read the letter to Parkinson that Hunt wanted to contact someone in the White House, Parkinson said, 'Give us a week.' And Hunt came back and said, 'No you get two days.'"

"So they said, 'Okay. Something will be worked out in a couple of days.' And that something, it appeared to me, had to do with a contact and it also had something to do with the funding for the defendants."

Not long afterward, Mrs. Hunt, using the code name "Chris," called to arrange the first transfer of funds. "I went over to her car and she gave me an envelope and she said, 'This is the payment for your salary for five months, beginning in July through whatever

it is'—I think it was November...

"I asked her if she wanted a receipt and she said, no, it was not necessary, [that she would be making an accounting to Mr. Bittman for it.] McCord also talked to her about legal fees. "They want to know," she reported back to him later, "if you're going to keep quiet."

'Executive Clemency'

Still later, Hunt brought up the same question with him directly. Testified McCord: "(Hunt) said, 'we have legal fee money for you.' And I said, 'What goes along with it?' ... He put it this way, 'Everybody's naturally interested in knowing whether you're going to keep quiet.'"

McCord felt this was merely a maneuver to keep him quiet until the election, so he put off Hunt until Nov. 7. Then he decided "to go ahead and take the legal fee money." But he refused to be bound if the legal fees were offered "as a weapon to keep us from saying anything."

The question came up again at a meeting with Mrs. Hunt on Nov. 30. As McCord interpreted the conversation, "essentially there wasn't going to be any more money unless you fellows agree to plead guilty and take executive clemency at a later time and keep your mouth shut."

He quoted her as saying,

"They want to know if more than one year is okay with you ... staying in jail more than one year, and then executive clemency." McCord turned down the deal saying he was going to plead not guilty and fight the case. "And she repeated this to me three more times," he recalled, "and it was in the context of 'Well, I'm not sure they're going to give you any more money' ..."

"The meaning was very clear, that 'Unless you agree to go along with this, you can forget about any further legal fee money, or any further salary continuance.'"

Footnote: After the break-in squad was arrested inside Democratic Party Headquarters, McCord testified, the higher-ups first wanted to blame it on the CIA. But neither Hunt nor McCord would go along with that cover story. Then there was talk about blaming the whole affair on Gordon Liddy, the Watergate ringleader. McCord quoted Mrs. Hunt as saying she had been told "that there were now plans to charge Liddy. Some type of plans was under way to charge Liddy stole the money and bribed Hunt and McCord to perform the operation. I said, 'Well, you can pass the word that I won't stand for that ... it's not true. It's not the way it happened.'" Parkinson has denied any role in getting money to the defendants.