

WXPost

MAY 31 1973

Probe Is Sought Into Alleged Rifling Of Democrat Mail

By Ronald Kessler
Washington Post Staff Writer

Rep. Charles H. Wilson (D-Calif.) yesterday asked Postmaster General E. T. Klassen to give him a report on allegations that first-class mail had been opened and turned over to Nixon campaign officials last fall.

Wilson, the chairman of a Post Office and Civil Service Subcommittee, said members of the press and "others" had asked him if he could confirm a story that the local grand jury looking into the Watergate scandal had been given information that the mail of Democratic presidential candidates had been opened.

"I have requested the postmaster general to report to me immediately as to whether there is any truth to the story that postal employees have been involved in illegal acts resulting in revealing personal information contained in first-class letter mail," Wilson wrote.

"Augmenting this demand," he said, "I call on any postal employee or government official to contact me with information detailing the unauthorized tampering of the mail. In connection with this appeal, I guarantee full anonymity."

George Gould, an aide to Wilson, said his telephone calls to the Justice Department to inquire about any grand jury investigation of postal employees were not returned.

Wilson's statement was the second public reference by a congressman to the possibility that mail had been illegally opened during the campaign. Earlier this month, Rep. Thomas P. ("Tip") O'Neill (D-Mass.), majority leader of the House, charged in a speech in Allentown, Pa., that mail of Democrats had been "opened, Xeroxed, and placed in Nixon campaign headquarters."

Subsequently, an aide to O'Neill acknowledged that the Massachusetts Democrat had obtained the information from persons without direct knowledge either of the alleged incident or of the government probes of the Watergate scandal.

Commenting on the O'Neill charge, William J. Cotter, assistant postmaster general for inspection services, the investigative and auditing arm of the U.S. Postal Service, said he had been assured by his men and by the Justice Department that there is no basis for the charge.

The Watergate prosecutors could not be reached for comment yesterday.

Opening first-class mail without a court order is punishable by a fine of up to \$500 or a prison term of up to five years, or both.

Government investigators say court orders are rarely sought because judges require an exact description of the piece of mail to be opened before they will grant an order.

In contrast to court-ordered opening of mail,

mail cover, a procedure for recording the return addresses and post marks of letters, is a relatively common investigative tool, government officials say.

The covers, analogous to obtaining records of telephone toll calls, require only the approval of the postal inspection service.