

The \$100,000 Question

Mystery is dear to the heart of Howard R. Hughes, the eccentric industrialist, but even by his standards there are too many mysteries surrounding the \$100,000 in cash Mr. Hughes transmitted to Charles G. Rebozo, President Nixon's close friend. The uncontested fact appears to be that the money was handed over in two equal installments in 1969 and 1970 by a Hughes associate. It was subsequently stored by Mr. Rebozo in a safe deposit box and finally returned by an unspecified route earlier this year.

The reasons for this financial round-trip remain hazy. Mr. Rebozo is reported to have told Senate Watergate committee investigators that the money was intended as a contribution to the 1970 Congressional campaigns. Those political contests, however, began and ended without benefit of any of that ready cash. Mr. Hughes in the meantime was more active than his donations: he obtained Government approval for his 1969 purchase of Air West. He also obtained reversal of an antitrust ruling that would have stood in the way of his buying a Nevada hotel, a go-ahead he ultimately did not use.

Like other industrialists, Mr. Hughes appears not to have put his largesse into one political basket. He reportedly also made sizable contributions to Vice President Hubert Humphrey and to the late Senator Robert F. Kennedy, allegedly to help pay off the deficit of the latter's 1968 Presidential campaign. The special mystery of the \$100,000 transfer to Mr. Rebozo, however, can be summed up simply: Why Mr. Rebozo?

Mr. Rebozo had no official standing in any Republican campaign organization—neither in the 1970 Congressional elections nor subsequently in the Committee for the Re-Election of the President. In view of his much-publicized friendship with Mr. Nixon and his personal part in facilitating the purchase of the President's San Clemente estate, prudence alone should have dictated against extended storage of the political funds in Mr. Rebozo's strong box. It is not customary, even among persons of Mr. Rebozo's reputed wealth, to let such substantial amounts lie inactive for years, without interest, unless their existence might be deemed embarrassing.

Why, indeed, did the hidden \$100,000 treasure suddenly seem embarrassing enough in 1973 to counsel its return? Had all that money simply been filed and forgotten, brought back to memory only by tales of hot cash in the safes of the Nixon re-election committee, the White House and Mr. Nixon's personal lawyer? The trail of odd coincidences in the flow of money from Mr. Hughes to Mr. Rebozo, and back again, places a heavy strain on the explanation that nothing more was involved than routine political contributions.

Deputy White House Press Secretary Gerald L. Warren has not disposed of the \$100,000 mystery by proclaiming the President's confidence Mr. Rebozo "acted properly" in handling the money. If anything, the statement merely heightens public curiosity about why it was proper to store all that cash so long, then suddenly return it to its donor.

The Watergate investigations have already proved that serious political misdeeds have been committed by the President's surrogates, allegedly without Mr. Nixon's knowledge. The question now in need of answer is what Mr. Nixon knew when his closest friend accepted and held cash gifts which could so readily be construed as being intended for his personal use.