

Watergate Prober Ceases Activity

By John Hanrahan

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Sen. Edward J. Gurney (R-Fla.), President Nixon's loyal ally on the Senate select Watergate committee, has ceased to be an active, functioning member of the committee, according to Senate sources and records.

A check of the transcripts of the committee's hearings shows that Gurney has not been present to ask questions at any of the committee's last eight public sessions.

In contrast, all of the other six committee members have attended at least four of the last eight public sessions, with Sens. Lowell P. Weicker Jr. (R-Conn.) and Joseph M. Montoya (D-N.M.) having perfect records.

The last eight public sessions cover the time from Oct. 31 to Nov. 15, during which period Gurney acknowledged that the Justice Department was investigating allegations that Florida builders secretly contributed large sums of money to him and expected preferential treatment from the Federal Housing Administration.

In addition to absenting himself from public sessions, Gurney also has not been attending any of the private meetings of the senators in recent months, sources said.

Gurney has denied knowledge of such fund-raising efforts.

There have been recent occasions when one senator was needed to swear in witnesses for executive sessions, or one senator was needed because certain witnesses wanted at least one committee member to chair the session. On some of these occasions, other committee members were unavailable or busy, and Gurney was available but declined to come and preside, sources said.

Several Senate sources said Gurney had been one of the committee's least active members long before his problem with the Justice Department probe appeared in the press, but that in the last two months it has reached the point where he is no longer functioning as a committee member.

Gurney's office was called for comment Friday but, apparently because of the holiday season, there was only a recorded announcement asking callers to leave a message. Other efforts to reach Gurney were unsuccessful.

Gurney has made no public disclosure as to why he is absenting himself from the committee's activities, and some committee members' aides said that he has not told other senators—or at least some of the other senators—why he is not participating in sessions.

Sources said the apparent explanation for Gurney's recent inaction with the committee is the federal probe.

Early last month, the Miami Herald reported that one of Gurney's former fund raisers, Larry E. Williams, of Orlando, had agreed to plead guilty to two felony charges and to testify for the government, in return for immunity from additional prosecution.

The newspaper said Williams told federal investigators that he collected more than \$300,000 in cash from government contractors for a secret Gurney Boosters Fund.

The Herald also reported that Jim Groot, who resigned as Gurney's administrative assistant in October, had told investigators that on several occasions in 1971 and 1972, Williams gave him envelopes stuffed with thousands of dollars in cash for Gurney.