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O'Brien Says Hunt Threat On Funds Was Not Explicit

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The House Judiciary Committee heard testimony yesterday that Watergate conspirator E. Howard Hunt Jr. did not make a blackmail threat against the White House in the explicit terms that John W. Dean III reported to President Nixon during their key March 31, 1973, conversation.

But committee members generally agreed that Hunt's reported remarks were an implied threat, which Dean, then White House counsel, may have embellished because he had other information about what Hunt knew.

The witness at the closed impeachment inquiry hearing yesterday was Paul L. O'Brien, a lawyer for the Committee for the Re-election of the

President, to whom Hunt made his request for about \$120,000 on March 16, 1973.

O'Brien relayed Hunt's message to Dean, who sent it on to Frederick C. LaRue at the re-election committee. LaRue has testified that \$75,000 was delivered to Hunt's lawyer, William O. Bittmann, the evening of March 21 as payment for Hunt's legal fees.

Members said O'Brien testified that he understood it was not hush money but money for legal fees, which under some conditions might be proper. However, Dean told the President on March 21, according to the White House tape-recording transcripts, that hush money had been paid to the Watergate defendants and that more was needed. The President made several statements which seemed to indicate that he

See IMPEACH, A10, Col. 1

IMPEACH, From A1

agreed and at one point said, "For Christ's sake, get it."

Dean's report to the President of a threat by Hunt against John D. Ehrlichman, then the President's chief domestic affairs adviser, was an important factor in the President's apparent agreement that hush money should be paid.

The morning of March 21, 1973, Dean told the President in detail about the attempts to cover up White House involvement in the Watergate break-in. He said this about Hunt's threat:

"Hunt has now made this direct threat against Ehrlichman. . . . He says, 'I will bring John Ehrlichman down to his knees and put him in jail. I have done enough seamy things for him. . . .'"

Members said O'Brien told the committee that Hunt had told him he had done "some seamy things" for Ehrlichman and would have to "review his options" if he did not receive more money.

The President and Dean agreed that one of the "things" was the break-in of the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist which Hunt supervised. Ehrlichman is on trial here now on charges that he was involved.

Rep. Hamilton Fish Jr. (R-N.Y.) said it was plain from O'Brien's testimony that he was just an attorney from the re-election committee who was conveying a message he did not entirely understand.

Fish said Dean, in reporting to the President, "obviously embellished" on what O'Brien

had told him. However, Fish said that Dean, who admitted to being in on the Watergate cover-up from the beginning, had the advantage of knowing more of what was going on than O'Brien.

According to Fish and other committee members, O'Brien testified that Dean told him they were both "getting screwed" in serving as conduits for such threats.

From that point on, Fish said, O'Brien indicated that he was very concerned about getting embroiled. "He knew it would be an obstruction of justice crime if there were a quid pro quo behind Hunt's demands," said Fish.

Rep. Henry P. Smith III (R-N.Y.) said that if he had heard Hunt speak the words O'Brien reported, "I would have considered it an implied threat."

"What difference does it make whether he threatened to put Ehrlichman on his knees?" asked Rep. Jack Brooks (D-Tex.). "It was a blackmail threat."

Members said O'Brien testified that he understood the money was requested for legal fees and living expenses. Hunt was to be sentenced a few days later for his involvement in the June 17, 1972, break-in at Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate complex.

But Dean in his March 21 conversation with the President said, according to the White House transcripts, that money had been paid to the Watergate conspirators since just after the break-in to pay lawyers and buy silence. Dean

explained to the President the beginning of the money payments just after the break-in in these words:

"Alright, then they started making demands. 'We have to have attorneys' fees. We don't have money ourselves and you are asking us to take this through the election.' Alright, so arrangements were made . . . And I was present in dis-

cussions where these guys had to be taken care of. Their attorneys' fees had to be done."

O'Brien was named an unindicted co-conspirator by the Watergate grand jury which indicted seven persons for involvement in the cover-up.

O'Brien was the first Judiciary Committee witness to be called at the request of the President's lawyer, James D. St. Clair. St. Clair's thesis is that the only offense for which the President might be impeached would be involvement in the Watergate cover-up, and specifically for involvement in payment of hush money. He is focusing almost solely in trying to convince the committee that the President was not involved, and that any money that was paid was for legitimate expenses.

O'Brien's testimony did not seem to make any great impact on committee members. Though O'Brien said he didn't

know hush money was being paid, the transcripts show that Dean told the President hush money was being paid and more was needed. "Whatever Mr. St. Clair is trying to prove is not clear," said Rep. Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.) after yesterday's session.

The committee then began questioning LaRue and will continue on Monday afternoon. St. Clair hopes to show that Dean set in motion the payment of the \$75,000 on March 21 by telephoning LaRue before rather than after his meeting. St. Clair contends, it the call were made before the meeting, St. Clair contends, it would tend to show the President was not involved.

The committee didn't reach the point of asking LaRue that question yesterday. LaRue has admitted involvement in the payment of hush money and pleaded guilty to a charge of conspiracy to obstruct justice.



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Hunt leaves Chicago courtroom after pre-trial conference on Hunt's suit against

United Airlines involving 1973 plane crash in which his wife Dorothy was killed