

Hunt Book: White House Aides Sought Help for Nixon Defense

By Lawrence Meyer

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White House lawyers working on President Nixon's impeachment defense invited Watergate conspirator E. Howard Hunt Jr. to meet with them at the White House last spring about Mr. Nixon's defense, according to a prepublication copy of Hunt's memoirs.

J. Fred Buzhardt, the White House counsel at the time the approach to Hunt was made, confirmed yesterday that he and presidential Watergate lawyer James D. St. Clair had attempted to question Hunt and the other original Watergate defendants. Buzhardt said "we were trying to ascertain some facts that were in doubt it."

According to Buzhardt, who said that the original Watergate conspirators were approached through their lawyers after the special Watergate prosecutor had been notified, none of those contacted agreed to talk to the White House lawyers. Hunt called the request "outrageously inappropriate."

Buzhardt said the effort to talk to Hunt was made in order to find out when he received payments of money and who gave them to him.

Hunt received more than \$200,000 in Nixon re-election committee funds, after the Watergate break-in to be used for legal fees and family support. Hunt has denied in public testimony and denies in his book that the money constituted blackmail paid to buy his silence.



E. HOWARD HUNT JR.
... writes memoirs

Hunt conceded, however, that during a Jan. 29, 1974 appearance before the federal grand jury investigating the Watergate cover-up that he had told a Nixon re-election committee lawyer in March, 1973, that he would have to review his "options" if his demands for money were not met, leaving the implication that he would reveal "seamy things" that he had done for the White House.

Although Hunt initially resisted any interpretation that he was threatening to reveal the "seamy things" if his demands were not met, he ultimately made an admission in response to the following question by assistant special prosecutor Richard Ben-Veniste:

"Is there any other interpre-

tation other than the clear meaning of the words that you would review your options about these so-called seamy things unless they met your demands?" Ben-Veniste asked.

"No," Hunt replied in agreement.

Hunt also asserts in his book that in October, 1972, before the original Watergate trial, his attorney approached the Watergate prosecutors offering full testimony concerning Hunt's knowledge and asked for the prosecutors' recommendation that Hunt receive only a suspended sentence.

Hunt said that his lawyer, William O. Bittman, reported to him that principal assistant U.S. attorney Earl J. Silbert rebuffed the offer, saying he did not need Hunt's testimony and intended to compel his testimony after the trial regardless of its outcome.

Bittman confirmed in a telephone interview last night that he did attempt to sound out the prosecutors about Hunt's proposed guilty plea. Bittman said, however, that the negotiations "never really got off dead center" because the prosecutors would agree to nothing more than telling the trial judge, Chief U.S. District Judge John J. Sirica, that Hunt was cooperating. Bittman said that bargain was unacceptable to him.

Bittman said he had no recollection of telling the prosecutors "the extent of Hunt's knowledge" or of telling them "about what Hunt could or would testify." Although Hunt suggests in his book that the

prosecutors passed up a chance to end the cover-up, Bittman said, "If anything, I though they were too aggressive."

At the time Hunt pleaded guilty to the charges against him on Jan. 11, 1973, he told reporters that to his "personal knowledge" no "higher-ups" were involved in the Watergate break-in.

Although Silbert said in a telephone interview that he could not recall any discussion with Bittman in October, 1972, about Hunt's pleading guilty, "On the merits of the case, I wouldn't have recommended a suspended sentence in return for a plea because I felt Hunt ought to go to jail."

Even after Hunt had pleaded guilty, had received immunity and had been called before the grand jury to testify, Silbert said, Hunt remained uncooperative. "I don't think it's any secret that when he went into the grand jury, he (professed to know) nothing about nothing," Silbert said. "The lies were phenomenal."

Silbert now is acting United States attorney for the District whose nomination is pending in the Congress.