

# The Bennett Mystery

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By J. Anthony Lukas

In 1969, both men joined the Nixon Administration: Colson as a White House assistant, Bennett as director of Congressional relations at the Department of Transportation. In early 1970, Colson invited Bennett to lunch. One of Colson's jobs at the White House was to deal with interest groups and he asked Bennett to be his "contact man" at Transportation. Bennett was delighted to be of service.

In July 1970—probably at Colson's behest—a very important interest group got in touch with Bennett. A call came from William Gay, a top aide to Howard Hughes. Gay and Bennett were both Mormons and Hughes had increasingly surrounded himself with that steady, straight-living, efficient breed. Gay asked Bennett to find out whether anything could be done to stop the Government's plans to dump tons of nerve gas on the ocean floor near the Bahamas, where Hughes was planning to move. Bennett looked into it, then reported that nothing could be done.

But apparently Gay was impressed by his fellow Mormon. For one day in December he called again. Hughes had just dismissed Robert Maheu, his chief lieutenant, and this meant that Maheu's Washington representative—Larry O'Brien—would soon be out of a job too. Hughes was looking for a new Washington man. Would Bennett like the job? Bennett would. "Get set then," Gay said. "Get a base."

By marvelous coincidence—or perhaps not—Colson called Bennett at just this time to suggest that he buy Robert R. Mullen & Company, a Washington public relations firm which had long served as a C.I.A. front. Since

1932, Mullen's men in Stockholm, Mexico City, Amsterdam and Singapore had been C.I.A. agents. At home, Mullen helped form the Cuban Freedom Committee, another C.I.A. front, and many of the company's employees here were "retired" from the C.I.A. One of these was Howard Hunt, who "retired" from the C.I.A. on April 30, 1970 and joined Mullen the next day.

In early 1971—armed with the blockbuster Hughes account—Bennett bought the Mullen company. In April, he was introduced to its C.I.A. supervisor Martin J. Lukasky. And for the next two years, Bennett served as an indispensable link between the White House, the C.I.A., Howard Hughes, Howard Hunt, Gordon Liddy, Tom Gregory, Dita Beard and others.

Since Watergate, Bennett has gone to work full-time for Hughes in Encino, Calif. But, of late, his former constituents have been falling out with him, most notably Colson.

Colson now charges that Bennett was the key figure in the C.I.A.'s efforts to cover up its own role in Watergate and to blame the whole thing on the White House. He cites several C.I.A. memos which suggest that Bennett was feeding stories to Bob Woodward, who was "suitably grateful," and who was protecting the Mullen company and the C.I.A.

Woodward concedes that Bennett was one of his important sources during the Watergate investigation. Whether or not he was Deep Throat—Woodward has consistently refused to identify his super source—Bennett seems to have had access to much if not all of the information coughed up by Deep Throat.

J. Anthony Lukas is author of "Nightmare: The Underside of the Nixon Years," from which this article is adapted.

First, a little Watergate quiz:  
Who was Howard Hunt's employer at the time of the Watergate break-in?

Who arranged the release of Dita Beard's hospital bed denial of her role in the International Telephone and Telegraph scandal?

Who helped recruit Tom Gregory to infiltrate the Muskie and McGovern campaigns?

Who set up the dummy Nixon campaign committees to receive covert funds from milk producers?

Who suggested that Hank Green-  
spun, publisher of The Las Vegas Sun, might have information in his safe that would interest the White House?

Who represented multimillionaire Howard Hughes in Washington during the Watergate period?

Who served as the contact man between Gordon Liddy and Howard Hunt in the days immediately after the Watergate break-in?

Who made a report on the Watergate matter to the Central Intelligence Agency two weeks after the break-in?

Who surreptitiously fed information to Bob Woodward at The Washington Post in a manner suggestive of "Deep Throat"?

The answer to all these questions is the same: Robert Foster Bennett. And who is Bennett? He is the mystery man of Watergate, a shadowy figure rarely mentioned in most accounts, but whose trail can be followed through the darkest corners of the scandal.

Bennett is significant because he stood astride one of the story's crucial intersections—where the interests of the White House, the C.I.A., and Howard Hughes converged. Thus, tracing his path may help us sort out just what those interests were.

In the beginning, Bennett was a friend of Chuck Colson's. They met during the 1968 campaign, when Bennett was managing the re-election campaign of his father, Senator Wallace F. Bennett, Republican of Utah. Colson, then a Washington lawyer, raised \$15,000 for the Senator.

JDW: Each of you sent me the same editorial article from NYT Times 1/29/76, "The Bennett Mystery," by J. Anthony Lukas. Between the early edition JDW gets and whatever later one goes to DC, not the last, the entire first column and the necessary first line of the second was eliminated. I'll make and give each of you a copy. HW 2/6/76