

The Wild Trial

By William Safire

WASHINGTON—In the interval between the Democratic and Republican Conventions, a political time bomb is set to explode: the trial of Gulf Oil lobbyist Claude C. Wild Jr. on charges of felonious campaign contributions brought by the Watergate special prosecutor.

Let us cast our minds back to one of the great moments of Washington hypocrisy. On Nov. 14, 1973, the Senate Watergate committee called Mr. Wild to be a witness, unctuously sympathizing with him about the terrible arm-twisting he was forced to undergo by Nixon fund-raisers until he coughed up \$100,000 of Gulf's cash. The nation was properly shocked at such revelations.

In the course of his Senate testimony, Mr. Wild dropped in a sentence—unnoticed at the time—that must have sent a chill through the Senators interrogating him: "There is a great deal of solicitation done by the legislative branch, too."

Chairman Sam Ervin veered off the subject; not one of the other Senators, basking in national renown for their fight against evil, picked that point up or treated the witness as anything but an honest businessman put upon by money-hungry Presidential candidates.

The reason is plain: According to a report filed in United States District Court by a Gulf cleanup committee headed by John J. McCloy, an attorney swears that Mr. Wild told the Watergate prosecutors and the Securities and Exchange Commission that recipients of Gulf cash included "all Senators on Watergate except Ervin."

Picture the moment in the Senate committee room: Senators Baker, Inouye, Montoya, Weicker were there (Senators Talmadge and Gurney were absent), all sweating out the possibility that the witness before them would expose their hypocrisy to the world. Not one had the courage or honesty

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to ask: "For the record, would you state if you made any contributions, in cash, to any of the members of this committee?"

A couple of years later, the tip of Mr. Wild's iceberg popped up: For example, of \$5,000 given to Senator Baker by Gulf in 1972, half was apparently by check and legal, the other half was in cash and questionable. On another occasion, the McCloy report states that Mr. Wild and another Gulf vice-president handed Senator Baker in his office \$2,000 in cash and \$2,500 by check. (At no time did his visitors say, "This is an illegal contribution.")

On July 26, when Mr. Wild's trial begins, more of the Senate Watergate committee's coverup will be exposed. The indictment specifies an illegal 1973 contribution of \$5,000 to the campaign of Senator Daniel Inouye, Democrat of Hawaii, who earned the enthusiastic support of millions of TV fans when he characterized a witness before him with a heartfelt "What a liar!"

The special prosecutor, for safety's sake, has tossed in a second count—a \$2,500 allegedly illegal contribution to Georgia Democratic Senator Sam Nunn—and is putting the pressure on Mr. Wild with the related indictment of William C. Viglia, who is accused of lying to a grand jury about bringing large amounts of cash into the country from a Gulf Bahamas subsidiary.

The iceberg's tip still remains relatively small. Starting with CREEP's \$100,000, and adding in all the unproved allegations mentioned in the McCloy report—\$50,000 to Walter Jenkins for Lyndon Johnson, \$15,000 to the Jackson campaign, the stipend of \$10,000 a year cash to Hugh Scott, the unspecified amount paid by Gulf Oil to Mark Hatfield's campaign "at the request of the Kuwait ambassador," the sums to the Watergate committee members, etc., the whole shebang only adds up to a few hundred thousand dollars.

But we know that there is a whole iceberg down there. The McCloy report details some of the cash brought into the country by Mr. Viglia: From 1960 to 1972, \$4,530,000 was brought into the United States for payment by Mr. Wild to American politicians. And Mr. Viglia was not the only carrier.

Think about that: Unless he kept it all himself, Mr. Wild shelled out at least four and a half million dollars in cash to United States political figures in a twelve-year period. He knows who got how much. At the trial, it may be in his interest to tell all, and the timing of the revelations might have an effect on the 1976 nominations and elections.

At the Wild trial, perhaps the special prosecutor will get the full accounting in examining the defendant; perhaps the defense will present the accounting to show how Mr. Wild was a conduit to benefit everybody the jury knows and loves. Or, if the lobbyist is found guilty, perhaps the who-got-what accounting will be considered in ameliorating the sentence.

But Mr. Wild has a great deal to tell us about our political figures, including those who have come to prominence in the pose of white knights.

The Watergate scandals shifted power in Washington to the halls of Congress, and it is fitting—now that we have begun to look critically at the supposed Good Guys—that the last blast of the special prosecutor should shatter the plaster pedestals that some of our lawmakers have been standing on.