The curious Washington days of deposed Vegas Prince Bob Maheu

By Shelby Coffey III

With that, the ascent began for Maheu. Often referred to as "charming" because of his interest in others, he made many friends in Washington, the kind of friends who can help with a favor later.

One former Maheu Associate recalls another early mission was tied to Howard Hughes. The associate says that the job involved surveillance of Stuart Cramer III, who at the time had recently married actress Jean Peters. The couple was living in Washington. She soon divorced Cramer and married Hughes. If one asks Maheu today if that was his first case for Hughes, Maheu replies: "You did say the first? To that, the answer is no."

In "missions"—
- Maheu and Associates lined up stockholders in a bitter New York Central proxy fight.
- They aided the Senate Banking and Currency Committee when the senators dashed after the publicity in some housing scandal. (The senatorial association was flaunted.)
- An Associate rigged up a chair with an electronic eavesdropping device, then left it in the apartment of a Maheu client's ex-wife. With the information gathered by a listening device in an apartment down the hall, according to the client, they were able to reduce the alimony he paid.
- In the mid-'50s Maheu also helped lawyer Edward Bennett Williams in the defense of Aldo Icardi, accused in a bizarre World War II murder.
- Maheu and several Associates sold approximately $60,000 worth of electronic equipment to the Dominican Republic regime of General Rafael Trujillo. "I thought it was all a sophisticated type of thing that would detect firearms brought in at the airport," says Maheu today. He is careful to add that since he was often out of town on assignments he didn't always know what his pack of ex-G-men might have been up to or down to.

* In 1956 Harold Stassen was running to "Dump Nixon." Maheu & Associates oversaw a poll that countered a poll by Stassen that showed Richard Nixon to be a drag on the Republican ticket. Maheu's counterpoll, of course, showed Nixon to be a plus. It was mainly backed (though Maheu neglects to mention it) by William Lush, the controversial New Hampshire publisher.

"I took on missions that most
show later, and apparently triggered by worry over the reactions of his mother and his wife, the young man became sick to his stomach. Fighting back the tears, he admitted his role in the killing of the pusher.

In January, Lance Corporal Michael Statman, Pfc. Frederick Sikorski and Lance Corporal Magargal were each charged with premeditated murder, felony murder, conspiracy and robbery of an "unknown Vietnamese" male.

Magargal is a nice looking kid, a sort of hard-eyed Tal Hunter, with the honed-down features of the typical overtrained Marine boot. Short haired, big shouldered, 5-foot-8 in a compact frame. He looks as though he'd have made a good high school football player, which is what he was going to be, maybe, until a backyard wall fell on him in Memphis, Tenn., when he was 15 and badly fractured an ankle, requiring the placement of a pin through a bone. He had grown up in Silver Spring with his four sisters and mother, the son of a Secret Service agent who had died when George was 8.

As a youngster, George had been a good enough linebacker for the Green Meadows Boys Club in Greenbelt, Md., to be named his Little League's most valuable player. It was one of the big moments of his early life, of course. He and his mother moved to Memphis in his early teens. After the accident, he became a letter-winner in swimming. He liked to hunt and fish. (In fact until Nov. 12, 1969, his only brush with the law had been at the age of 16, when he was caught fishing without a license in Mississippi.)

He returned for his senior year of high school to Silver Spring, to live with a married sister.

In 1965, on his return from Memphis, George began dating a Takoma Park girl named Judith Lackey. They went steady all through senior high school. He was apparently a model student. As his father-in-law wrote to counsel during the court martial in Danang, George always got Judy in on time, never drank, never smoked, never swore ("not even slang") around her parents, offered to mow the lawn, and —a real trial for a ten-ager—ingratiated himself with all nine of the Lackey grandchildren.

He was the kind of kid who had a paper route when he was young, screened the family porch, built a carpent for the family home, hung curtains, earned his own date money, worked full time in a print shop during his last year in high school—without failing behind in his grades. Brought up in an all-female family, he had noticeably asserted a deliberate sports-oriented masculinity and he had acquired a few old-fashioned virtues like manners.

He was undoubtedly not quite so square as his endorsements make him out to be but there is sufficient evidence, backed by his defense attorney's own assessment on the trial scene, that he was a "very decent, very nice kid, maybe even a little young for his age but in a good, naive way."

Shortly before he graduated from Northwood High in the spring of 1968, he became engaged to his long-time girlfriend, Judith. But before giving Judy the ring he adhered to the quaint old custom of asking her father. William Lackey thought that the kids were a little young, but he liked the spirit and charm of his prospective son-in-law. He especially was impressed by the fact that while completing his senior year George worked 40 hours a week in two different print shops, to earn extra money and to help out a friend who was starting his own business.

Judy and George were married in a Missionary Baptist Church Sept. 21, 1968, and enjoyed a few months together before he received a notice to take a pre-induction physical. In spite of his bad ankle, he passed. (A doctor had earlier told him he would be draft-proof.)

"I always thought that, of the four services, the Marines were far the best," he noted later. He dropped in to see the Marine recruiter at the Marlow Heights Shopping Center, and was told that the ankle injury would keep him out of the elite Corps. "I went to my doctor and told him the ankle didn't bother me anymore. He gave me a certificate saying that I was alright, and the Marines accepted me. Actually, it still does hurt me (even though the pin's out) when the weather's bad," he says. A few months passed before the induction process was finished, and then

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people would call impossible," says Maheu in his slow emphatic voice, hopeful, one suspects, that the phrase will catch.

Once, during those balmy Associate days, he sent some of his men over to do a bugging test for Tommy (the Cork) Corcoran, the New Deal brain truster lawyer. The results were negative.

Maheu entertained lavishly and well in a large home out in Sleepy Hollow in the Virginia suburbs. A gourmet who loves to cook, Maheu often had lobsters flown in fresh from Maine for dinner parties.

One party-goer recalls meeting Robert Finch at a Maheu party, though Finch now recalls meeting Maheu only at a couple of lunches after he had become then-Vice President Nixon's A.A. At the time Maheu had just gone partners with Robert King, Nixon's previous A.A., an ex-FBI man.

Maheu served as a consultant to David McDonald when he was head of the United Steelworkers Union. "Bob is a goddamn great, fine and decent man," says McDonald today. Maheu helped during a strike and an election.

Maheu and Associates also used their FBI-honed skills, according to several sources, for corporations such as Westinghouse, Panhandle Eastern gas pipeline, Continental Airlines, and Schenley's Corporation, whose owner contributed over $1 million to the J. Edgar Hoover Foundation.

By the early '60s Maheu was doing more work for Hughes, often flying from Washington to the West Coast, where he still represented Hughes' interests in many halls of power. Around 1962 he moved to a suburb of Los Angeles and operated on the second level of the Hughes empire.

"He isolated nerve centers and went after them," recalls friend Hal Marlowe, the (ex-FBI) former under-sheriff of Los Angeles County.

As might be expected, some enemies were also left behind. Lou Russell, an ex-Associate, remembers telling him, "You son of a bitch, you trade on friendship." Others remember Maheu as something of a blowhard who hinted at big connections that were often tenuous at best.

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Double-knit acetate side pocket, a "guaranteed" on. A pretty print dress with soft shirring under a guaylock, on. For four years, the ar-estrus of confidante, alter ego. In 1966, in a stunning set of financial maneuver-ers, Howard Hughes began to buy into Las Vegas. Over all of the $500 million operation bowled the keen dark eye of Robert Alme Maheu, suddenly and enigmatically elevated to the caste of confidante, alter ego. They made an odd pair, set in the neon bowl of Nevada desert. On the one (and upper) hand, the soprano-voiced Texan, born to wealth, bold avia-tor turned gaunt recluse, business genius, the sort of man who boasted of deflowering scores of vir-gins but sired no known heirs. On the other hand, the bass-voiced French-Can-adian worker's son, growing up hungry in his own way, a gregarious man with the build of a tough lightweight and the elaborately courteous manners of the upwardly striving, at one time a near-bankrupt, a pro-fessed devout Catholic, watchful father of four. In his later years Hughes shunned the sort of people Maheu had sworn so hard to rub tailored el-bows with.

For four years, the ar-angement worked equi-ally. Maheu made a half-million dollars a year, lived in a mansion worth the same amount. (The mansion stirred much envy among other Hughes executives, claims Maheu. "They called it Little Caesar's Palace. At the time I thought it was very dull."") He was flown in Hughes' jet, chauffeured in Hughes' coupes, slum-bered in Hughes' suites. When they were in Las Vegas, senators like Ed Muskie would drop in to say hello to the man who spoke for the billionaires. Whispers followed his entrance into plush res-taurants when he returned to Washington for presidential inaugura-tions and other corporate games along the Potomac. For all this, he was on call 24 hours a day. Some-times he had to leave guests like Joe DiMaggio (now a PR man for the Hughes Sports Network—that's where he went) to answer phone calls from his insomniac master, known in Las Vegas as "The Man."

In the autumn of 1970, The Man quit calling. In a wildly confused after-math, Hughes seemed to have disappeared; Maheu made off with a truckload of corporate files ("To pro-ect them"), rival Hughes Tool Co. chief-ains Chester Davis and Bill Gay won court approval of Maheu's ouster. Maheu lashed back with a countersuit for $50 million in damages and settled down to the harsh legal chess game in a rented house. He didn't own a car to drive away from Little Caesar's Palace; these days he rents a white Lin-coln Continental. When he executes a Classic One-Two Wash-ington NAME Drop—such as: "How is Mayor Washington doing? I met him at the President's Prayer Breakfast"—you know that he says it with-out much hope of ever representing Howard Hughes in Richard Nixon's White House again.

At times, though, in the quiet of his new rented home, Robert Maheu seems a happy man. Standing behind the bar in his crimson-walled "miniature Silver Slip-per" saloon, his gold-and-silvered, the mansion and its gleaming alabaster porches behind.