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Citizen Hughes

Papers reveal an obsession to buy power

STAT

By Paul Galloway

There was a moment, Michael Drosnin said, after he had been immersed for months in his research, that he didn't want to write his book about Howard Hughes.

Despite what he was finding in Hughes' private papers and the effect he was confident his book would have, a part of him suddenly was arguing that everything he had discovered should remain a secret, that only he should ever know the whole story.

"It's hard to explain, but it was as though he had a hold on me," Drosnin said. "He had taken me over. I had become obsessed with Howard Hughes. I had all this incredible information, and yet I found myself wanting to keep everything to myself. I was becoming as secretive and crazy as he was.

"I had gotten too close. I had to step back for a few days and get my bearings. The writing finally became cathartic. It was a way to escape."

The story says something about the risks a writer takes in becoming totally absorbed in his subject, and it may say even more about the curious power wielded by Howard Hughes, which, for Drosnin, could be as real in death as it had been while he was alive.

Drosnin, 38, is a former reporter for the Washington Post and the Wall Street Journal. He was a 30-year-old freelancer when, in 1977, he came into possession of the secret records of Howard Hughes, who had died a year earlier. The papers, including more than 3,000 of Hughes' handwritten memos, had been stolen from the Hughes headquarters in Los Angeles in 1974 and never recovered, despite a number of ostensibly intensive investigations.

'Hughes believed the government was for sale, and to a great degree he was right.'

—Michael Drosnin

For more than seven years, Drosnin spent almost every waking hour with the legacy of Howard Hughes and the spoor of his vast bribery, poring over his lode of notes, interviewing hundreds of people about him, examining thousands of documents related to him and his activities.

"It was like living with him," Drosnin said. "And in spite of his corruption and his bigotry and his insanity, I tend to like Howard Hughes.

"Again, it's something that's hard to explain. For one thing, he was a great coauthor, a great natural writer. He was mad as a hatter but also something of a genius. He wrote lucid, forceful memos, and he was so innocent of his own evil. He was in so much pain and terror, he could see nothing but his own fears."

The result is "Citizen Hughes" [Holt, Rinehart & Winston, $18.95], which is high on the best-seller lists. The Tribune and other newspapers have given it generally excellent reviews, it has been the subject of many television reports and articles, and the authenticity of its basic source material—the Hughes memos—has not been challenged.

The book is a detailed study of a man of monumental wealth and unparalleled, paranoiac eccentricity who, while keeping himself invisible to all but a handful of dutiful aides, exerted enormous influence at the highest levels of government.

Hughes earned his influence the old-fashioned way: He bought it.

His abundant financial support was calculatedly bipartisan and awesomely effective. Drosnin's roll call of Hughes beneficiaries starts at the top with Richard Nixon and Lyndon Johnson, who always gave his entreaties respectful attention and often action, and includes Lawrence O'Brien, who was on the Hughes payroll at $15,000 a month while he was chairman of the Democratic National Committee, and Republican Sen. Paul Laxalt, whose family law firm received at least $180,000 from Hughes while Laxalt was governor of Nevada.

"The power of great wealth is extraordinary," Drosnin said. "Hughes believed the government was for sale, and to a great degree he was right. His money got him

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virtually everything he wanted.

"Laxalt, as governor, did everything in his power to allow Hughes to buy Las Vegas, and the Nixon administration cooperated by waiving the antitrust laws so he could purchase his collection of gambling casinos there. Nixon also approved his takeover of Air West, which was accomplished through stock fraud, and he was able to get a vast increase in military contracts for his companies, almost all of them on a cost-plus, no-bid basis."

No one seemed immune to the seductive rustle of the billionaire's greenbacks. During his 1968 campaign for the presidential nomination, Robert F. Kennedy dispatched Pierre Salinger to solicit a campaign contribution from Hughes through his long-time chief representative, Robert Maheu. Kennedy was assassinated before Salinger was to have picked up the money.

Drosnin is among those who are convinced that Hughes was the catalyst for the Watergate scandal, and in the book he assembles the persuasive circumstantial evidence that supports this belief. According to the theory, the burglary of Lawrence O'Brien's office in the Watergate complex occurred because Nixon, aware that O'Brien was working for Hughes, was anxious to know if O'Brien had information about Hughes' secret $100,000 contribution to him, which was made through Nixon's friend Bebe Rebozo and which Nixon felt could jeopardize his 1972 campaign for the presidency.

Drosnin became interested in Hughes, especially the Hughes headquarters break-in and theft of the papers, while working on an article for New Times magazine, which is now defunct. As he began making calls, he realized that what had been trumpeted as dogged, deep-digging investigations by the FBI, the CIA and the Los Angeles Police Department were, in fact, superficial and halfhearted.

"These agencies were tripping over each other getting out of the way," he said. "They knew the papers could be politically explosive, and the FBI and the CIA suspected that the other was implicated in stealing them."

There were plenty of other suspects, too, including the Mafia, Maheu and the White House. The evidence is that it was an inside job pulled off to protect the papers from several subpoenas that had been issued for them.

Drosnin's probing would eventually lead to the professional thief who had stolen the papers and had then turned the tables on the people who had hired him by not giving them up. Drosnin arranged a meeting with the Pro, as he is called in the book, in the back of a bar and confronted him with the evidence.

"He was carrying a gun in the waistband of his trousers, which he was careful to let me see," Drosnin said. "I told him I was either going to write a book about him and the break-in, if he didn't cooperate, or about Hughes, if he did.

"I can't say that did it, because it didn't. He is a very tough guy, and he stared at me without saying a word. Later, he told me he was trying to decide whether he would kill me or cooperate."

The Pro made the choice Drosnin preferred.

After receiving the boxes of purloined papers and having them authenticated by handwriting experts, Drosnin signed a contract with his publisher and began work on the book.

He changed his name and went into hiding, giving his address only to his lawyer, his immediate family and a few friends. He didn't even tell his publisher where he could be reached. "I did this to protect the papers more than myself," he said.

Most knew him as Michael Howard, a combination of the first names of author and subject and, with pointed irony, the alias Jesse James used when he retired from a career of armed robbery.

"On one level," Drosnin said, "Hughes' life is the ultimate money-doesn't-buy-happiness story. He tried to create his own private heaven in which he was the only inhabitant, but he ended up creating his own hell.

"On another level, this tells us something about the streak of madness that runs through many people with power, not only Howard Hughes. . . . People are driven to great power by great fear, a need to control the world in order to feel safe in it. We have a world wired for instant death because of that equation.

"People can accept corruption as an explanation for what people in power do, but they resist madness. It's too unsettling. Richard Nixon was, after all, more than a little bonkers. If he could have, I think he would have isolated himself as much as Hughes did."

Hughes, the Wizard of Odd, had no such restrictions, directing his empire and channeling his payoffs through a ceaseless flow of memoranda, many of which are reproduced in the book.

"Hughes was childlike in a way, profoundly cynical and yet amazingly naive," Drosnin said. "His whole effort to buy the country was not done out of greed. What he was really after was to protect himself from the outside world. To him, everything outside his bedroom was contaminated."

The politicians who accommodated him would have been shocked at the world Hughes had locked himself in, for the gulf between illusion and reality was absurdly immense.

For a long time, the truth stayed in the room with Hughes and his trusted servants. The truth was that the emperor not only wore no clothes but that he was daft beyond idiosyncracy, lying naked in a bed in his own filth and excrement, a codeine junkie who never cut his hair, his nails, never bathed, never brushed his teeth, never disposed of any of his precious bodily byproducts, even preserving his urine in jars that were stored in a closet.

Yet the unseen Hughes presence was impressive enough to have prompted Richard Nixon to order his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, to go to Hughes and brief him about the antiballistic missile. Hughes, unnerved by the prospect of human contact, quickly stopped any plans for such a mission.

Many of the Hughes memos deal with his lunatic preoccupation with hygiene and the avoidance of his fellow mortals. "Some of the memos are outrageously funny," Drosnin said, "although, of course, he didn't see the humor in them."

If some are hilarious, those that document the attempted subversion of public officials and political candidates are disturbing and cautionary.

Hughes reached the pinnacle of his power and also the nadir of his crazed, personal torment in his last decade of life, from 1966, when he arrived in Las Vegas, to 1976, when he died at age 70 in an airplane transporting him to Houston from Mexico for medical treatment.

While in Las Vegas, Hughes' fears began to focus on the bomb, which Drosnin views as the one redeeming strand in his tangle of delusions. "Here was a madman who perceived the overriding peril of our time," Drosnin said.

Hughes saw himself as the target of the underground nuclear tests that were being conducted in Nevada and concentrated his efforts to stop them, becoming a one-man ban-the-bomb movement. "We have learned since that he was absolutely right that the tests were extremely dangerous, and he succeeded in stopping them for a while and eventually getting one series moved, at a cost of $200 million to the taxpayers, to Alaska." Drosnin said.

After learning all that he did about the damage Hughes wrought with his fortune and his fear, Drosnin said two troubling thoughts linger with him:

"You have to wonder what Hughes could have achieved if he had been more sophisticated and less bizarre, and you have to wonder what others with his kind of power, who are more subtle and shrewd, are doing today."

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