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Ford's 'Stonewalling'

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On the surface, both the question and the answer seemed straightforward enough.

Q. Mr. President, would you also like to set the record straight tonight on an issue that John Dean has raised? Did you at any time use your influence with any members of Congress or talk to lobbyist Richard Cook about blocking a 1972 Watergate break-in investigation by Wright Patman's House Banking Committee?

A. I have reviewed the testimony that I gave before both the House and the Senate committees, and those questions were asked. I responded fully.

A majority of the members of the House committee and the Senate committee, after full investigation, came to the conclusion that there was no substance to the allegations. I do not believe they are any more pertinent today than they were then, and my record was fully cleared at that time.

Former White House counsel John Dean, in a Wednesday morning interview on NBC's Today show, had named Richard Cook as the man who had done the "legwork" in getting then House Minority Leader Gerald Ford and others to sandbag Wright Patman's investigation into the laundering of money in the Watergate scandal.

When Ford was asked about that allegation at his press conference last Thursday night, he made no outright denial, but said only that he had "reviewed the testimony" he had given at the time of his confirmation, and that the congressional leaders had accepted that testimony at the time.

The fact that he was avoiding a direct

answer did not become clear, however, until another reporter asked a follow-up question:

Q. Mr. President... I don't think you quite answered the question. The question is not about your testimony at the time specifically. It is about the new allegations from John Dean that, in fact, you did discuss six times with Mr. Cook the matter of blocking the investigation by the House of Watergate, and at the time you said... you did not recollect such discussions. Do you now recollect such discussions with Mr. Cook on that subject?

A. I will give you exactly the same answer I gave to the House committee and the Senate committee. That answer was satisfactory to the House committee by a vote of 29 to 8, and I think a unanimous vote in the Senate committee. The matter was fully investigated by those two committees, and I think that is a satisfactory answer.

Whatever the impression when Ford answered the question the first time, it was clear as he answered the second time that he was stonewalling, that he was not going beyond his testimony of two years ago.

What he had said at that time is that he didn't remember discussing "with anybody on the White House staff" the notion of shutting down the Wright Patman investigation.

Ford had acknowledged that he had a role in killing the investigation, but insisted, during the hearings on his nomination as Vice President, that he did it on his own and not at the urging of the Nixon White House.

Maybe so. But it would be a lot easier

to believe were it not for the transcript of a Sept. 15, 1972, tape of a White House conversation involving President Nixon, H. R. Haldeman and Dean. The three were discussing the Patman investigation and how best to go about cutting it off.

DEAN: Jerry Ford is not really taking an active interest in this matter that is developing, so (Maury) Stans is going to see Jerry Ford and try to brief him and explain to him the problems he has...

NIXON: What about Ford? Do you think so? Connolly can't, because of the way he is set up. If anybody can do it, Connolly could, but if Ford can get the minority members... Withall, etc., Jerry should talk to Withall. After all, if we ever win the House, Jerry will be Speaker, and he could tell him if he did not get off (blank) he will not be chairman, ever.

DEAN: That would be very helpful to get all of these people at least pulling together. If Jerry could get a little action on this.

HALDEMAN: Damn it, Jerry should. They talk for a while about other things. Then:

DEAN: I think Maury (Stans) ought to brief Ford on exactly what his whole side of the story is. Maury understands the law.

HALDEMAN: I will talk to Cook. NIXON: Maybe Ehrlichman should talk to him. Ehrlichman understands the law.

HALDEMAN: Is that a good idea? Maybe it is. NIXON: I think maybe that is the thing. This is a big play. He has to

know that it comes from the top. While I can't talk for myself, he has to get at this and (blank) this thing up.

Well, Jerry Ford (blanked) the thing up, all right, only he denies that anybody on the White House ever asked him to. Maybe it was coincidence.

A Sept. 12, 1972, memo to Haldeman from Dean runs through a list of "counter actions" that could be taken for public relations value, including "a complaint to the Fair Campaign Practices Committee with respect to the statements and actions" of Larry O'Brien and other Democratic officials. The memo stressed the political value of such actions, making clear that they were not proposed as serious litigation.

On Oct. 6, 1972, the Fair Campaign Practices Committee received, on Ford stationery, a formal complaint against the Democrats. It was signed by four GOP congressional leaders, including Gerald Ford.

Maybe that was coincidence, too. Dean says Ford was in on the efforts to squelch the investigation.

Ford says he wasn't.

Wright Patman is dead. But apparently there are unreleased White House tapes covering the period of the Patman investigation. And it doesn't seem far-fetched to suppose that these tapes may include references to Jerry Ford's (blanking) up the investigation, with some indication as to whether it was loyal team-play or happy coincidence.

And, since Ford was unsuccessful in his efforts to give the tapes back to his ousted predecessor, they presumably are available. Why isn't Special Prosecutor Charles Ruff listening?