Text of Watergate Statement

Here is the text of the statement issued last night by the president:

On May 17th the Senate Select Committee began its hearings on Watergate. Five days later, on May 22nd, I issued a detailed statement discussing my relationship to the matter. I stated categorically that I had no prior knowledge of the Watergate operation and that I neither knew of nor took part in any subsequent efforts to cover it up. I also stated that I would not invoke Executive Privilege as to testimony by present and former members of my White House staff with respect to possible criminal acts then under investigation.

Thirty-five witnesses have testified so far. The record is more than 7,500 pages and some two million words long. The allegations are many, the facts are complicated, and the evidence is not only extensive but very much in conflict. It would be neither fair nor appropriate for me to assess the evidence or comment on specific witnesses or their credibility. That is the function of the Senate Committee and the courts. What I intend to do here is to cover the principal issues relating my own conduct which have been raised since my statement of May 22, and thereby to place the testimony on those issues in perspective.

I said on May 22nd that I had no prior knowledge of the Watergate operation. In all the testimony, there is not the slightest evidence to the contrary. Not a single witness has testified that I had any knowledge of the planning for the Watergate break-in.

It is also true, as I said on May 22nd, that I took no part in, and was not aware of, any subsequent efforts to cover up the illegal acts associated with the Watergate break-in.

In the summer of 1972, I had given orders for the Justice Department and the FBI to conduct a thorough and aggressive investigation of the Watergate break-in, and I relied on their investigation to disclose the facts. My only concern about the scope of the investigation was that it might lead into CIA or other national security operations of a sensitive nature. Mr. Gray, the Acting Director of the FBI, told me by telephone on July 6th that he had met with General Walters, that General Walters had told him the CIA was not involved, and that CIA activities would not be compromised by the FBI investigation. As a result, any problems that Mr. Gray may have had in coordinating with the CIA were moot. I concluded by instructing him to press forward vigorously with his own investigation.

During the summer of 1972, I repeatedly asked for reports on the progress of the investigation. Every report I received was that no persons, other than the seven who were subsequently indicted, were involved in the Watergate operation. On September 12, at a meeting attended by me, and by the Cabinet, senior members of the White House staff and a number of legislative leaders, Attorney General Kleindienst reported on the investigation. He informed us that it had been the most intensive investigation since the assassination of President Kennedy, and that it had been established that no one at the White House, and no higher-ups in the campaign committee, were involved. His report seemed to be confirmed by the action of the Grand Jury on September 15th, when it indicted only the five persons arrested at the Watergate, plus Messrs. Liddy and Hunt.

Saw Dean on Sept. 15

Those indictments also seemed to me to confirm the validity of the reports that Mr. Dean had been providing to me, through other members of the White House staff—and on which I had based my August 29 statement that no one then employed at the White House was involved. It was in that context that I met with Mr. Dean on September 15, and he gave me no reason at that meeting to believe any others were involved.

Not only was I unaware of any cover-up, but at that time, and until March 21st, I was unaware that there was anything to cover up.

Then and later, I continued to have full faith in the investigations that had been conducted and in the reports I had received, based on those investigations. On February 16, I met with Mr. Gray prior to submitting his name to the Senate for confirmation as permanent Director of the FBI. I stressed to him that he would be questioned closely about the FBI's conduct of the Watergate investigation, and asked him if he still had full confidence in it. He replied that he did; that he was proud of its thoroughness, and that he could defend it with enthusiasm.

My interest in Watergate rose in February and March as the Senate Committee was organized and the hearings were held on the Gray nomination. I began meeting frequently with my counsel, Mr. Dean, in con-

Issued by the President

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...key administration figures who reported to the President on the Watergate affair.

nection with those matters. At that time, on a number of occasions, I urged my staff to get all the facts out, because I was confident that full disclosure of the facts would show that persons in the White House and at the Committee for the Re-election of the President were the victims of unjustified innuendoes in the press. I was searching for a way to disclose all of the facts without disturbing the confidentiality of communications with and among my personal staff, since that confidentiality is essential to the functioning of any President.

It was on March 21st that I was given new information that indicated that the reports I had been getting were not true. I was told then for the first time that the planning of the Watergate break-in went beyond those who had peen tried and convicted, and that at least one, and possibly more, persons at the Re-election Committee were involved. It was on that day also that I learned of some of the activities upon which charges of cover-up are now based. I was told then that funds had been raised for payments to the defendants, with the knowledge and approval of persons both on the White House staff and at the Re-election Committee. But I was only told that the money had been used for attorneys' fees and family support, not that it had been paid to procure silence from the recipients. I was also told that a member of my staff had talked to one of the defendants about clemency, but not that offers of clemency had been made. I was told that one of the defendants was currently attempting to blackmail the White House by demanding payment of $120,000 as the price of not talking about other activities, unrelated to Watergate, in which he had engaged. These allegations were made in general terms, they were portrayed to me as being based in part on supposition, and they were largely unsupported by details or evidence.

These allegations were very troubling, and they gave a new dimension to the Watergate matter. They also reinforce my determination that the full facts must be made available to the grand jury or to the Senate Committee. If anything illegal had happened, I wanted it to be dealt with appropriately according to the law. If anyone at the White House or high up in my campaign had been involved in wrongdoing of any kind, I wanted the White House to take the lead in making that known.

Dean Report Asked

When I received this disturbing information on March 21st, I immediately began new inquiries into the case and an examination of the best means to give to the grand jury or Senate Committee what we then knew and what we might later learn. On March 21st, I arranged to meet the following day with Messrs. Haldeman, Ehrlichman, Dean, and Mitchell to discuss the appropriate method to get the facts out. On March 23rd, I sent Mr. Dean to Camp David, where he was instructed to write a complete report on all that he knew of the entire Watergate matter. On March 28th, I had Mr. Ehrlichman call the Attorney General to find out if he had additional information about Watergate generally or White House involvement. The Attorney General was told that I wanted to hear directly from him, and not through any staff people, if he had any information on White House involvement or if information of that kind should come to him. The Attorney General indicated to Mr. Ehrlichman that he had no such information. When I learned on March 30th that Mr. Dean had been unable to complete his report, I instructed Mr. Ehrlichman to conduct an independent inquiry and bring all the facts to me. On April 14, Mr. Ehrlichman gave me his findings, and I directed that he report them to the Attorney General immediately. On April 15th, Attorney General Kleindienst and Assistant Attorney General Petersen told me of new information that had been received by the prosecutors.

By that time the fragmentary information I had been given on March 21st had been supplemented in important ways, particularly by Mr. Ehrlichman's report to me on April 14th, by the information Mr. Kleindienst and Mr. Petersen gave me on April 15th, and by independent inquiries I had been making on my own. At that point, I realized that I would not be able personally to find out all of the facts and make them public, and I concluded that the matter was best handled by the Justice Department and the grand jury. On April 17th I announced that new inquiries were under way, as a result of what I had learned on March 21st and in my own investigation since that time. I instructed all Government employees to cooperate with the judicial process as it moved ahead on this matter and expressed my personal view that no immunity should be given to any individual who had held a position of major importance in this Administration.

My consistent position from the beginning has been to get out the facts about Watergate, not to cover them up.

On May 22d I said that at no time did I authorize any offer of Executive clemency for the Watergate defendants, nor did I know of any such offer. I reaffirm that statement. Indeed, I made my view clear to Mr. Ehrlichman in July 1972, that under no circumstances could Executive clemency be considered for those who participated in the Watergate break-in. I maintained that position throughout.

On May 22d I said that "it was not until the time of my own investigation that I learned of the break-in at the office of Mr. Ellsberg's psychiatrist, and I specifically authorized the furnishing of this information to Judge Byrne." After a very careful review, I have determined that this statement of mine is not precisely accurate. It was on March 17th that I first learned of the break-in at the office of Dr. Fielding, and that was four days before the beginning of my own investigation on March 21st. I was told then that nothing by way of evidence had been obtained in the break-in. On April 18th I learned that the Justice Department had interrogated or was going to interrogate Mr. Hunt about this break-in. I was gravely concerned that other activities of the Special Investigations Unit might be disclosed, because I knew this could seriously injure the national security. Consequently, I directed Mr. Petersen to stick to the Watergate investigation and stay out of national security matters. On April 25th Attorney General Kleindienst came to me and urged that the fact of the break-in should be disclosed to the court, despite the fact that, since no evidence had been obtained, the law did not clearly require it. I concurred, and authorized him to report the break-in to Judge Byrne.

In view of the incident of Dr. Fielding's office, let me emphasize two things.

National Security

First, it was and is important that many of the matters worked on by the Special Investigations Unit not be publicly disclosed because disclosure would unquestionably damage the national security. This is why I have exercised Executive Privilege on some of these matters in connection with the testimony of Mr. Ehrlichman and others. The Senate Committee has learned through its investigation the general facts of some of these security matters, and has to date wisely declined to make them public or to contest in these respects my claim of Executive Privilege.

Second, I at no time authorized the use of illegal means by the Special Investigations Unit, and I was not aware of the break-in of Dr. Fielding's office until March 17, 1973.

Many persons will ask why, when the facts are as I have stated them, I do not make public the tape recordings of my meetings and conversations with members of the White House staff during this period.

I am aware that such terms as "separation of powers" and "Executive Privilege" are lawyers' terms, and that those doctrines have been called "abstruse" and "esoteric." Let me state the common sense of the matter. Every day a President of the United States is required to make difficult decisions on grave issues. It is absolutely essential, if the President is to be able to do

his job as the country expecte, that he be able to talk openly and candidly with his advisers about issues and individuals and that they be able to talk in the same fasion with him. Indeed, on occasion, they must be able to "blow off steam" about important public figures. This kind of frank discussion is only possible when those who take part in it can feel assured that what they say is in the strictest confidence.

The Presidency is not the only office that requires confidentiality if it is to function effectively. A Member of Congress must be able to talk in confidence with his assistants. Judges must be able to confer in confidence with their law clerks and with each other. Thoughout our entire history the need for this kind of confidentiality has been recognized. No branch of Government has ever compelled disclosure of confidential conversations between officers of other branches of Government and their advisers about Government business.

The argument is often raised that these tapes are somehow different because the conversations may bear on illegal acts, and because the commission of illegal acts is not an official duty. This misses the point entirely. Even if others, from their own standpoint, may have been thinking about how to cover up an illegal act, from my standpoint I was concrned with how to uncover the illegal acts. It is my responsibility under the Constitution to see that the laws are faithfully executed, and in pursuing the facts about Watergate I was doing precisely that. Therefore. the precedent would not be one concerning illegal actions only; it would be one that would risk exposing private Presidential conversations involving the whole range of official duties.

The need for confidence is not something confined to the Government officials. The law has long recognized that there are many relations sufficiently important that things said in that relation are entitled to be kept confidential, even at the cost of doing without what might be critical evidence in a legal proceeding. Among these are, for example, the relations between a lawyer and his cilent, between a priest and a penitent, and between a husband and wife. In each case it is thought to be so important that the parties be able to talk freely with each other, that they need not feel restrained in their conversation by fear that what they say may someday come out in court, that the law recognizes that these conversations are "privileged" and that their disclosure cannot be compelled.

If I were to make public these tapes, containing as they do blunt and candid remarks on many subjects that have nothing to do with Watergate, the confidentiality of the Office of the President would always be suspect. Persons talking with a President would never again be sure that recordings or notes of what they said would not at some future time be made public, and they would guard their words against that possibility. No one would want to risk being known as the person who recommended a policy that ultimately did not work. No one would want to advance tentative ideas, not fully thought through, that might have possible merit but that might, on further examination, prove unsound. No one would want to speak bluntly about public figures here and abroad. I shall therefore vigorously oppose any action which would set a precedent that would cripple all future Presidents by inhibiting conversations between them and the persons they look to for advice.

This principle of confidentiality in Presidential communications is what is at stake in the question of the tapes. I shall continue to oppose any efforts to destroy that principle, which is indispensable to the conduct of the Presidency.

I recognize that this statement does not answer many of the questions and contentions raised during the Watergate hearings. It has not been my intention to attempt any such comprehensive and detailed response, nor has it been my intention to address myself to all matters covered in my May 22nd statement. With the Senate hearings and the grand jury investigations still proceeding, with much of the testimony in conflict, it would be neither possible to provide nor appropriate to attempt a definitive account of all that took place. Neither do I believe I could enter upon an endless course of explaining and rebutting a complex of point-by-point claims and charges arising out of that conflicting testimony which may engage committees and courts for months or years to come, and still be able to carry out my duties as President. While the judicial and legislative branches resolve these matters, I will continue to discharge to the best of my ability my Constitutional responsibilities as President of the United States.