

Nixon Watergate Talk Fails to Dispel

By Lou Cannon

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The White House waited hopefully yesterday for the verdict of public opinion on the President's latest Watergate speech. Whatever that verdict may be, it was immediately clear that Mr. Nixon had done nothing to dispel the skepticism that confronts him in the White House press corps.

"When is the President going to make his Watergate statement?" was the first question that greeted deputy press secretary Gerald L. Warren yesterday at the daily White House press briefing.

Warren treated the question as a joke and dismissed it with a friendly smile. But he wasn't smiling later in the briefing when a reporter asked if the President was willing to submit to a lie detector test about his Watergate response.

Warren turned away but the reporter persisted saying his inquiry was "a serious question."

"That's a serious question which I am not going to address," Warren responded. "The President addressed this matter forthrightly . . . I resent the implication in your statement and will not respond to it."

White House officials from the President down are aware of the continuing press skepticism about Mr. Nixon's Watergate explanations. That skepticism probably deepened during Mr. Nixon's long silence on Watergate between his written May 22 statement and his televised speech to the nation Wednesday night.

In that speech, Mr. Nixon healed no wounds with the press. He said nothing about opening up his administration. At one point he assailed the press for praising as "a new idealism" an attitude that "became fashionable in the 1960s, as individuals and groups increasingly asserted the right to take the law into their own hands . . ."

Mr. Nixon has not held a news conference since March 15, the longest period without one during his presidency. Since he took office in early 1969, Mr. Nixon has

held only 31 news conferences, by far the fewest of any chief executive since the news conference became an institution of the modern presidency.

Press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler promised months ago that the President would hold a press conference. Hours before the President spoke Wednesday, Warren said that this news confer-

ence will come in San Clemente, Calif., where Mr. Nixon is scheduled to spend two weeks beginning Monday.

But the tone of the reporters' questioning yesterday indicated skepticism about whether the news conference will be open to Watergate questions.

This was Warren's first answer to the question about whether unrestricted questioning would be allowed:

"The President has issued a May 22 statement (about Watergate). The President issued another statement last night. The President addressed the nation last night, giving his view, his perception of the entire matter. The response we have been receiving has been overwhelmingly in support of the President's view. So, he has addressed the Watergate matter."

When it was pointed out by reporters that this left open the possibility of a news conference in which Watergate would be off limits, Warren said that questions on any topics would be allowed.

"The President has a habit, as you know, of accepting whatever questions you have and responding," Warren said.

This had generally been true—but not always—of Mr. Nixon's infrequent news

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conferences. Occasionally, the subject matter has been limited to domestic or to foreign policy. Once, the President ruled out political questions.

Reportorial interest in what would be only Mr. Nixon's fourth news conference of 1973 was heightened by the presidential speech and his accompanying statement Wednesday.

Mr. Nixon's decision not to give a point-by-point rebuttal to allegations raised in the Watergate case has made it even more likely than before that he will be asked Watergate questions at the news conference. A White House official said the question of a point-by-point rebuttal was discussed in preparation for the speech but abandoned because such a statement was considered likely to promote a continuing back-and-forth dialogue with the Senate Watergate committee.

Such a dialogue is also considered a possible danger that may arise from any prolonged press conference centering on Watergate issues.

Warren said in his briefing yesterday that telegrams and telephone calls were running between 5 to 1 and 6 to 1 in favor of the President's speech. But he also said that White House mail on the issue since May 22 has favored the President on Watergate by about the same ratio.

While the favorable mail has been coming in, national pollsters have reported that Mr. Nixon's popularity has sunk to its lowest point, a support figure of only 31 per cent in the latest Gallup Poll.

The President, therefore, is believed by White House

officials to be anxious to show to the nation that his administration is not permanently crippled by Watergate while the public makes up its mind about his latest speech.

With this in mind, Mr. Nixon will emerge Monday from several weeks of isolation from the public for a speech to the 74th national convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars in New Orleans. He will speak to an audience of an expected 4,500 at the Rivergate Convention Center and then fly directly from New Orleans to San Clemente.

White House officials have said that various other speeches before presumably

friendly audiences are considered likely in the months ahead.

These speeches, if they come, are expected to continue the President's plea to put Watergate aside and "get on with the urgent business of the nation."

Warren said the President is "determined" to do this when he was asked about Mr. Nixon's mood in the briefing yesterday. Warren otherwise declined to discuss the speech—or to identify those unnamed persons Mr. Nixon described on Wednesday night as "those who would exploit Watergate in order to keep us from doing what we were elected to do."

Once, the usually easygoing Warren threatened to abruptly end the briefing after one of his answers was drowned out by interruptions and banter. But Warren persisted and was finally rewarded by a compliment from Ted Knap, Scipps-Howard reporter and White House Correspondents Association president, for his efficiency and cooperation in putting out texts of Mr. Nixon's speech on Wednesday night.

It was the only grace note on another day of intermittent warfare between the President and the press.