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Watergate Judge Sirica dies of cardiac arrest at 88

WASHINGTON (AP) — John J. Sirica, the federal judge whose dogged pursuit of the truth in the Watergate scandal unraveled Richard Nixon's presidency, died Friday. He was 88.

Judge Sirica died at 4:30 p.m. Friday at Georgetown University Medical Center of cardiac arrest, said hospital spokeswoman Sandra Hvidsten. Judge Sirica had been in the hospital since Tuesday, when he was admitted for tests, she said.

Judge Sirica faced down Nixon in a historic struggle between a determined court and a resisting executive, compelling the president to yield the secret White House tape recordings that ultimately led to his downfall.

The judge said later that "if he (Nixon) had been convicted in my court, I would have sent him to jail."

The quiet, self-effacing Judge Sirica handled the whole spectrum of Watergate in his five-year association with the case: the break-in and cover-up trials; the indictments, guilty pleas and jailing of men who were among the most powerful in the nation; and the epic tapes battles, which included trying to learn how 18½ minutes of crucial conversation was erased.

Although Judge Sirica had been in robust health, looking much younger than he was, the strain took its toll. On Feb. 5, 1976, while speaking to a

law school alumni group, Judge Sirica collapsed in the middle of a sentence with a heart attack that would have been fatal if a trained federal marshal had not given immediate emergency aid.

When he recovered, Judge Sirica went back on the bench with a full case load, finally going into semi-retirement as a senior judge on Oct. 31, 1977 when he had been on the bench 20 years. He retired completely in 1986.

President Carter wrote Judge Sirica that he had become "a lasting symbol of unflinching devotion to duty."

The judge was praised Friday by one of the men he sent to prison.

"I think he was a great judge," said the Rev. Jeb Magruder, who spent seven months in prison for his role in Watergate. "He was the one who broke Watergate, and he was a tremendously bright but sensitive person."

"And even though I was a guilty party in all that, I felt he treated me fairly. You can't ask anything else of a judge but fairness."

Judge Sirica sentenced him to four years but released him after seven months, eight days and 11 hours, the Rev. Magruder said.

The Rev. Magruder was a top aide in the Nixon White House and later deputy director of the Committee to Re-Elect the President. He gradu-

ated from Princeton School of Divinity after he got out of prison and is senior pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Lexington, Ky.

All the major figures of Watergate paraded into Judge Sirica's U.S. District Court except for the biggest one of all — the president. Yet, though Richard Nixon resigned his office because of revelations brought into the open by the judge's decisions, Judge Sirica felt justice was ill-served.

"He should have stood trial," Judge Sirica wrote in his memoirs. "No matter how great his personal loss, Nixon did manage to keep himself above the law. He was forced to give up his office, but he was not treated the same way as the other defendants."

At the time of the Watergate burglary on June 17, 1972, Judge Sirica was chief of the 15-judge federal court for the District of Columbia, an honor that accrues automatically to the judge under age 70 who has the longest tenure.

As chief judge, the indictment against the Watergate burglars was returned to Judge Sirica and he had the option of assigning the case for trial or allowing it to go into a routine rotation.

He assigned it to himself. He handled it from the start like the case of a lifetime, which it turned out to be.