

Case Belittled By Weinberger

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CASPAR WEINBERGER
... "business as usual"

A member of the Nixon Cabinet said yesterday that the Watergate case was an "essentially ephemeral" matter, which would not damage the credibility of the President or impede the work of his administration.

Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare Caspar W. Weinberger said he was not wasting time worrying about the political espionage charges, because "pursuing our business as usual is vastly more important than getting involved in essentially ephemeral matters."

(Webster's Third International Dictionary defines "ephemeral" as being "of interest or value for only a short time.")

Weinberger's breakfast press conference was the first public appearance by a Cabinet member since Mr. Nixon told a Cabinet session on Friday that he was taking personal responsibility for clearing up the charges against high officials of the administration and the White House staff.

Weinberger, a political associate of Mr. Nixon's for two decades, declined to give details of the Cabinet meeting, but said: "I trust the President. He said he had no prior knowledge of the bugging, and I trust the President."

"I don't think it goes to the credibility of the President at all," he added.

The former budget director conceded that "anything in politics that has to be explained is bad. No party welcomes a series of events that has to be explained as much as this one."

But he insisted that he had seen no signs that the Watergate case has affected the morale of administration officials or that it would tend to weaken the President's hand in coming policy struggles with Congress.

Noting twice that "all during the period involved I was under the Hatch Act" (which bars federal employees from political activities) as budget director, Weinberger said, "I don't think it [the Watergate case] rubs off on anyone in the administration who was not involved."

"I'm trying to do my own job," he said. "It's a very big job. I know nothing about this matter. The people who managed the campaign moved in a very different orbit."

A reporter asked Weinberger if the Watergate case might become as damaging to Mr. Nixon as the "Eagleton affair" was to Sen. George McGovern in the 1972 campaign, recalling that Republicans had charged that McGovern's handling of the vice-presidential selection raised questions about his competence to manage the government.

Weinberger rejected the comparison. "We've been in office four years," he said "and I think we've conducted a very orderly and effective government."

He also rejected the suggestion that the current second-guessing of the White House handling of Watergate might cause more skepticism in Congress and the country about the administration's decisions on domestic policy and programs.

"There is no equivalent be-

tween the handling of matters in the campaign and matters of substantive conduct of government," Weinberger said. "There are different individuals involved and a different set of issues. I don't see that equivalence at all."