

Capital Lawyer Emerging As Key Watergate Figure

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WASHINGTON, April 26—John J. Wilson, a 71-year-old Washington lawyer with a cherubic face and a reputation for combativeness, has emerged as a central if enigmatic figure in the Watergate case.

Mr. Wilson was hired last week to represent H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman, two key Presidential aides who have been implicated in the case. Last Thursday and again yesterday, he met alone with President Nixon at the White House.

This morning, Mr. Wilson's long black limousine with the license plate "JJW-2" was parked in the White House driveway, but Ronald L. Ziegler, the Presidential press secretary, said he was there to see someone other than Mr. Nixon—presumably his clients, Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Ehrlichman.

And this afternoon, Mr. Wilson visited the Federal prosecutor in the Watergate case, Earl J. Silbert. He was seen at the courthouse late yesterday as well, but it was not known whom he had seen then.

Mr. Ziegler responded to nearly 100 questions on the Watergate case this morning at a news briefing that lasted more than an hour. Report: continued to circulate the some sort of White House staff shake-up was imminent, but the press secretary would not confirm them. Some White House sources said the President had decided to "hunker down"—to do nothing—for the moment.

Mr. Ziegler denied that either the President or "anyone authorized to speak for him" had offered to anyone either a position on the White House staff or a mandate to conduct a reorganization of the staff.

The applied the denial specifically in an article in this morning's Washington Post reporting that Congressional sources had said that former Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird had been offered Mr. Haldeman's chief of staff job and had turned it down.

Nonetheless, members of the staff continued to suggest names of men to whom the President might turn if he decides on a housecleaning. Among them were Donald Rumsfeld, a former staff member now serving as Ambassador to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization; William D. Ruckelshaus, head of the Environmental Protection Agency, and Bryce Harlow, who lobbied for the White House in two Administrations and now does so for Procter & Gamble.

Advice Is Sought

Mr. Nixon has turned for advice in recent days to a large number of persons whom he has known for some time. It became known today, for example, that he had talked by telephone with Robert H. Finch, the former Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare

and an old California friend.

Murray Chotiner, the President's chief political adviser in his Congressional days, was seen entering the White House earlier this week. There were also unconfirmed reports that Mr. Nixon had talked with Charles S. Rhyne, a former president of the American Bar Association, and a classmate of the President at law school.

Mr. Ziegler said that he was under orders from Henry E. Petersen, the Assistant Attorney General in charge of the case, not to discuss most of its aspects with reporters. To answer all questions, he said, would be to "prejudge" possibly innocent individuals or "to lead you as reporters to draw conclusions that may be false."

But for the second straight day, in a noticeable departure from the past pattern, he went out of his way to respond in a friendly and patient manner. There were no wisecracks, and his replies were studded with "sirs" and "ma'ams."

Mr. Ziegler gave a somewhat more detailed account than he had previously of the President's role in the "personal investigation" that Mr. Nixon announced last Tuesday. It includes, the press secretary said, the following principal activities:

• Consultations with a large number of persons outside the Administration.

• Discussions with members of the staff about their knowledge of the case.

• Requests to members of the staff to "determine certain things" for him.

• Detailed daily consultations with Mr. Petersen.

Mr. Ziegler repeated earlier statements that no member of the staff had offered or been asked for his resignation. But he conceded under questioning that Mr. Nixon, if he chose to, could simply accept the pro forma resignations that members of his official family filed early this year.

Neither the press secretary or other White House informants shed any light on Mr. Wilson's role. Mr. Ziegler said only that the President had sought the attorney's "perspectives and analysis."

But it appeared possible that Mr. Nixon was conferring with Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Ehrlichman only through Mr. Wilson on Watergate matters, while continuing to deal with them directly on everyday Government business.

Clients Would Testify

Mr. Wilson said neither of his clients had been subpoenaed by the grand jury but added that they would appear voluntarily if asked to.

He is not widely known to the general public, but he is a member of the inner circle of Washington lawyers and is often called in to assist some of the big names.

Mr. Wilson is described as a conservative—"a little to

the right of McKinley," one friend said—and as a staunch Republican "who really doesn't think Democrats ought to be citizens."

As a lawyer, he has a reputation for courtroom skill and for what another lawyer called "a certain truculence of combativeness." A third lawyer remarked that Mr. Wilson had "a litigious nature" and would never have been selected if his clients had sought compromise rather than a battle.

James H. Rowe Jr., a veteran Washington lawyer who has worked with four Democratic Presidents, said that if he were in trouble—"particularly if an indictment were involved"—Mr. Wilson would be one of the two or three men he would call.

Among Mr. Wilson's clients have been the American steel industry, whom he represented after President Truman seized the mills in 1952; the National Rifle Association; and Senator Barry Goldwater, who he represented in a successful 1969 libel suit against Ralph Ginzburg, the publisher.

In addition, the short, baldish attorney represented the Swiss holding company, Interhandel, in a 21-year struggle against the United States Government over the ownership of the General Aniline and Film Corporation. The Government argued that Interhandel was a front for I. G. Farben, a German company that passed under Nazi control in World War II.

Curiously, Mr. Wilson has had no experience in either the Federal Government or in politics. It was not known how Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Ehrlichman came to select him.