

Petersen Denies Nixon Said 'Go Easy'

By Jack Anderson

Assistant Attorney General Henry Petersen, who has been in charge of the Watergate prosecution for the past 10 months, has been quoted as saying President Nixon personally instructed him to "go easy" on the investigation.

This statement was attributed to Petersen by his brother-in-law, Melvin Clark, in front of my reporter Barbara Browne. Two other witnesses have also sworn they heard Clark repeat the statement on at least two separate occasions.

Petersen vigorously denied that the President had asked him to restrain the Watergate investigation in any way. He told us that his relationship with the President was "straight up and down" and the President "has never asked me to do anything improper."

Petersen acknowledged, however, that he had discussed Watergate confidentially with his brother-in-law and confirmed that his brother-in-law had correctly reported other details of their conversations.

Before we delivered our copies of the secret Watergate transcripts to Judge John Sirica, we searched them for signs that the prosecutors might be pulling their punches. We found they had spared no one, with one exception. It seemed to us they were easy on the President.

They missed several opportunities to ask witnesses about

the President's involvement in the Watergate scandal. We could find only one instance that the prosecutors brought up his name in their cross-examination. Of course, we were unable to examine all the transcripts.

Petersen admitted to us that he advised his prosecutors not to probe into the personal conversations between the President and his lawyer. He also reminded them that the President was not on trial. His own view, he said, is that the Justice Department cannot prosecute the President but that any evidence of wrongdoing should be submitted to the House of Representatives.

He didn't feel his admonition inhibited the prosecutors. This was echoed by one of the prosecutors who told us that Petersen in no way had tried to leash them. For years, we have known Petersen as an honest and honorable law enforcer who would not yield to political pressure. His three Watergate prosecutors also impressed us as men of integrity and ability.

Nevertheless, we learned last December that the White House hoped to confine the Watergate case to the seven original defendants. We wrote on Dec. 26 that the "Justice Department was discreetly sounding out some of the defendants . . . about entering guilty pleas and settling the affair without trial."

We suggested "the White House would like to avoid the embarrassment of a public

trial, which would spread on the court record details that have been limited so far to newspaper accounts . . . By pleading guilty the defendants could avoid a public spectacle and save the White House embarrassment. The White House, therefore, has a keen interest in preventing the case from ever coming to trial."

Petersen acknowledged that the prosecutors, indeed, dickered with the defense attorneys over offering guilty pleas. This is routine procedure, he said, before a prosecution. He would have been disappointed, he said, if the seven defendants had pleaded guilty to avoid a trial.

He also confirmed our report that White House counsel John Dean had been in close contact with the prosecution during the early investigation. Petersen insisted, however, that Dean had brought no pressure upon the prosecution to settle the case out of court.

From Justice Department sources, we have also learned that President Nixon gave explicit orders not to investigate the government burglary of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist and the use of wiretapping to uncover news leaks. As justification he cited the national security. Both Petersen and outgoing Attorney General Richard Kleindienst, nevertheless, were prepared to resign over this issue. But the President later reversed himself without any ultimatums.

When we asked Petersen about this incident, he would

say only that the President made the right decision to go ahead with the investigation of the government's role in the Ellsberg case.

As the brother-in-law related it, the conscientious Petersen has agonized over the Watergate horror. He is deeply troubled over his responsibility to investigate the presidency without, at the same time, damaging it. He has been in direct touch with the President both in person and by telephone since the April 15 order to find out who at the White House was responsible for Watergate. At their last meeting, the President gave him a set of cufflinks.

Petersen confirmed all these details, plus additional personal information that came from the brother-in-law. He insisted, however, that his brother-in-law must have misunderstood him if he got the idea the President had directed him to "go easy" on the Watergate investigation.

Footnote: The "go easy" statement was given to us by two witnesses, one of whom offered a detailed affidavit. Yet, because one of the witnesses is a defendant in a case indirectly funded in part by the Justice Department, we sent reporter Browne to accompany them on their next visit to the brother-in-law. She identified herself only as a "helper," and in front of her, the brother-in-law repeated his statement.