

Segretti Answer to Charges Discussed at White House

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White House Press Secretary Ronald L. Ziegler, according to a sworn deposition, attended a meeting with other top presidential assistants last October at which the aides discussed a proposed response by Donald H. Segretti to newspaper reports linking Segretti to a widespread campaign of espionage and sabotage conducted in behalf of President Nixon's re-election.

Ziegler's attendance at the meeting is mentioned briefly in a sworn statement by Fred F. Fielding, who was the top assistant to former White House counsel John W. Dean III. It was the first time Ziegler was mentioned in connection with strategy sessions at which presidential aides discussed responses to newspaper accounts of alleged White House involvement in the Watergate affair.

Ziegler said yesterday that he recalls attending such a meeting. "But I attended no meeting that was a strategy session," he said. "The meetings I attended were to ascertain the facts, and the facts in this case, at that time suggested there was no illegality or wrongdoing (by Segretti)."

The Fielding deposition, in which Ziegler is mentioned only once in connection with attending the meeting, makes no suggestion that the press secretary was involved in political espionage activities.

However, it is unusual for the White House to consider assisting a private citizen who didn't work for the government in preparing a public statement about news stories. Segretti is a California lawyer who did not work for the government.

Throughout the unfolding of the Watergate scandal, Ziegler's role has been that of presidential spokesman, relaying official White House comments to newsmen. Often he refused to comment on specific charges contained in newspaper accounts of the Watergate affair.

However, last October—around the time Ziegler attended the meeting mentioned in Fielding's statement—administration spokesmen apparently changed their strategy, deciding to attack the press for its coverage of the Watergate affair rather than largely to ignore charges of White House involvement.

Ziegler was in the forefront of those making attacks on the press. For example, last Oct. 16, the day after The Washington Post reported that Segretti reported his activities to Dwight L. Chapin, former presidential appointments secretary, Ziegler accused The Post of printing stories "based on hearsay, character assassination, innuendo or guilt by association."

Fielding's statement was contained in a deposition taken Tuesday as pretrial testimony in civil suits growing out of the Watergate affair. The deposition was made public Friday.

The deposition illustrated that Segretti was in touch with high level White House aides almost immediately after his name surfaced in newspaper reports and that presidential assistants worked in an atmosphere of fear and suspicion in dealing with persons connected with the Watergate case.

Fielding testified that on a Sunday sometime last October he received a call from Segretti, who said he was staying at a motel in Virginia and wanted to meet with Dean. Fielding said he relayed the message to Dean, who decided to meet with Segretti at the motel.

Fielding said he did not remember the exact date of the call from Segretti, but it is clear from the deposition that it occurred shortly after The Post reported on Oct. 10 that Segretti was an undercover agent in the Nixon re-election campaign.

"I cautioned Mr. Dean," Fielding testified, "and said, 'Gee, you know you might be walking into anything. Do you feel comfortable going out there not knowing anything about what kind of

set-up you might be walking into?' He agreed that maybe it wasn't such a smart thing to do to go out there."

That evening, Fielding said, Segretti met Dean at Dean's office. Fielding said Segretti wanted to see newspaper reports of his involvement in political espionage and sabotage activities. Fielding said he could not tell whether Dean and Segretti knew each other from possible previous meetings, "but obviously he (Dean) knew him (Segretti) enough to pass the word to tell him to call me."

The next day, Fielding visited Segretti in the Virginia motel room and took notes on a press release type statement Segretti had prepared denying he had engaged in illegal acts, according to the deposition.

Fielding said he then returned to the White House and walked into a meeting already in progress in Dwight Chapin's office. Attending the meeting, he said, were Chapin, Dean, Ziegler, John D. Ehrlichman, President Nixon's former chief domestic adviser, and Richard Moore, a special counsel to the President who reported to H. R. Haldeman, former White House chief of staff.

It is not clear from Fielding's deposition whether the meeting in Chapin's office was called to discuss Segretti or for some other purpose. Fielding said Dean "told me he was in a meeting or when I got back (to the White House) I was told to go to the meeting. It was one of the two."

Fielding said he read from his notes about Segretti's statement and "there was some general discussion about Mr. Segretti." He said that at one point Ehrlichman asked, "What kind of a guy is this fellow? What kind of appearance?" Chapin, Fielding said, "asked how he (Segretti) was, or something of that nature." Chapin and Segretti were classmates at the University of Southern California.

Segretti's statement was never released.