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Garment Survives Watergate Slugfest

Washington.

Leonard Garment, long-time behind-the-scenes confidant for President Nixon, had to bravely come out this week to meet the press, and it was rough.

Mr. Garment, as acting counsel to the President now that John Dean is elsewhere, helped draft Mr. Nixon's extraordinary statement admitting some concealment on Watergate, but with cause. So after the President unloaded 4,000 words of that, a press briefing was in order—and that meant Mr. Garment.

For many years, Mr. Garment, one-time chief of litigation in the Nixon Wall Street law firm, counseled Mr. Nixon on civil rights, social change, the arts and the humanities. When Watergate swept bodies out of the White House, Mr. Garment suddenly found himself summoned by the President to use the great legal mind he has to help extricate the President from Watergate's seaweed.

As he faced the press in the White House briefing room with its TV klieg lights and wall-to-wall jam of men and women with note pads and insistent looks, it was like an amateur boxer going in the ring for the first time. Whatever sparring Mr. Garment had done with the press in his years in government, it had been done in the relative safety of his office. Now he was out in the arena, and the cry was for action and blood.

Mr. Garment had scarcely begun explaining the President's statement when he got punched in the nose (verbally, of course, it is not that bad here yet) by a woman reporter with a question as to "why isn't the President making it?" Mr. Garment shook it off and continued with his ready remarks.

At times Mr. Garment

sounded like he was pleading for the Marguis of Queensbury rules. Punched with a succession of stinging jabs, Mr. Garment said: "I think perhaps we can have a continuing understanding here that we will both try to avoid either asking questions or answering questions that involve prejudgment of issues of fact that are quite serious in their implications for many individuals."

Several times Mr. Garment was smothered in the corner of the ring and, like the boxer trying to stop the rain of blows and punch his way out, he protested, "Let me just finish, please . . . Let me get my answer. Just a moment. . . . May I finish answering your question . . . Ron (Ziegler), could I just finish with one statement?"

Midway in the fight, Mr. Garment felt he had been gouged in the eye with too many thumbs, and he protested: "I doubt anybody else here has encountered a situation in which the articles of faith by which jour-

nalists and lawyers live by are so unceremoniously and so rigorously ignored."

To which the press responded with a thundering punch: "It has been 10 months, Len [since Watergate happened]."

What obviously bothers Mr. Garment is that the reaction by the public, Congress and the press to the Watergate scandal has not elicited the orderly process by which lawyers want to work — courtroom procedures, direct line of questioning and a ban on hearsay and irrelevant testimony.

Thus the President's statement, Mr. Garment explained, came in part because of "an increasing number of allegations and charges, a virtual Niagara of charges from public proceedings and leaks from private official investigations conducted in secret, and these charges, many of them hear-

say, two or three steps removed from knowledgeable assertions of fact, have in many instances been bantered as fact in news accounts, in newspapers and on television."

Mr. Garment doggedly stuck to this attack throughout and, at the end, was telling the press of its enormous responsibility to inform the public concurrent with an equally important obligation to individuals under investigation by grand juries not to prejudice their rights.

After his first exhausting bout with the press, Mr. Garment came back next day for another go, and took 76 more minutes of it.

So Mr. Garment, good stout-hearted fellow that he is, was led out of the ring, a bit wobbly on his feet, but having the satisfaction of knowing he wasn't knocked out. The press even said "thank you" after the bout.