

Prosecution opens case in Watergate cover-up

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Asst. Special Prosecutor Richard Ben-Veniste laid out his case against the five Watergate cover-up defendants Monday, declaring he will prove an illegal conspiracy among "the most powerful men in the government of the United States."

He said the plan to cover up the break-in at Democratic National Committee headquarters more than two years ago "involved the participation of even the President himself."

The 31-year-old dark-haired prosecutor, speaking from a lectern only a few feet from the jury box, said former President Richard M. Nixon was willing to sacrifice a close aide to save himself and closer associates when the cover-up was unraveling.

Quoting from an April 19, 1973, White House tape, Ben-Veniste said Nixon believed that if former White House Counsel John W. Dean were turned over to Watergate prosecutors, they might

not try and make a case against presidential aides H.R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman or Nixon himself.

On the tape, Nixon said Haldeman and Ehrlichman should "give the investigators an hors d'oeuvres (Dean), maybe they won't come back for the main course," the prosecutor said.

Ben-Veniste said that in mid-April 1973, Nixon, Haldeman and Ehrlichman "considered a strategy of pushing Dean outside the circle of wagons around the White House."

On April 19, Dean issued a statement saying he would not allow himself to become a scapegoat. He was fired by Nixon on April 30, after months of handling the White House response to the various Watergate investigations.

Dean will be the first prosecution witness Tuesday once three of the defense lawyers have made their own opening statements in the trial, which is expected to last three or four months.

Ben-Veniste presented the now-familiar story of the cover-up in a courtroom jammed with reporters, about 35 spectators and some relatives of the defendants. He spoke for just more than three hours, describing the cover-up in short, simple sentences, describing hundreds of meetings, phone calls and actions which comprise the complicated conspiracy case.

Among the few new developments was the assertion that former White House aide Richard Moore, who attended one of the crucial meetings of the cover-up, was pressured to forget what he remembered about how some payoffs to the original Watergate defendants were handled.

Ben-Veniste quoted Haldeman as telling Nixon that Moore's memory on the February 1973 meeting at La Costa, Calif., "has become feeble beyond measure."