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Nixon Denies Dean Knew of Bugging

By Lou Cannon

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KEY BISCAIYNE, Fla., March 6—President Nixon denied today that White House counsel John Dean III had any prior knowledge of the Watergate bugging and said he had "absolute and total confidence" in Dean.

The President telephoned Dean this morning from his office in Key Biscayne to discuss with him a Los Angeles

Times report that Dean and former presidential assistant Jeb Stuart Magruder had advance knowledge of the bugging of Democratic headquarters.

Following the conversation, White House press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler "flatly" denied that Dean had prior knowledge of the bugging.

"The President has complete confidence in Mr. Dean and wanted me again here this morning to publicly express President Nixon's absolute and total confidence in Mr. Dean in this regard," Ziegler said.

Ziegler issued no similar statement about Magruder but called attention to Magruder's own prior denial of the charge. Throughout the Watergate affair, Ziegler has limited his comments to the alleged involvement of White House staff members and he said today that responding to the charge about Magruder was "not relevant to this particular podium."

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Magruder served as a deputy director of the Committee for the Re-Election of the President during Mr. Nixon's campaign.

The Los Angeles Times reported Sunday that convicted Watergate conspirator James W. McCord Jr. told Senate investigators that both Dean and Magruder had prior knowledge of the bugging. Ziegler called the accusation "very extraordinary" and said it had prompted the telephone call from the President to Dean.

Ziegler also criticized a "hastily-called" press conference conducted Sunday afternoon by Samuel Dash, counsel for the Senate select committee investigating the Watergate charges.

"I would suggest that that would not appear to me to be an orderly and judicious method of procedure," Ziegler said.

Dash declined at the press conference to discuss the substance of the discussions he had held with McCord. But he said that McCord had "named names" and was supplying the committee with a "full and honest account" of the Watergate conspiracy.

The administration had promised to cooperate with the committee, which is headed by Sen. Sam J. Ervin Jr. (D-N.C.). Ten days ago the White House backed down slightly from its original insistence that only Ervin and Sen. Howard Baker (R-Tenn.), the committee's ranking minority member, could inspect FBI files on the Watergate.

At Ervin's insistence, Attorney General Richard Kleindienst agreed to allow inspection of the files by Dash and minority counsel Fred Thompson while continuing to refuse access to any senators except Ervin and Baker.

Several senators on both sides of the aisle, however, have continued to insist that Dean be made available for questioning. The Republican leadership has quietly passed the word to the White House that it would be advisable for Dean to testify before the Ervin committee.

The President, citing the doctrine of "executive privilege," has up to now refused.

Ziegler disclosed today that Dean had telephoned acting FBI Director L. Patrick Gray III "four or five minutes after

the story ran on the wires" in which Gray concurred with an observation by Senate Majority Whip Robert Byrd (D-W. Va. that Dean had lied to the FBI during its investigation of the Watergate incident.

Gray's comment came while he was testifying at his confirmation hearings before the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Ziegler said that Dean, who denied the charge, had asked Gray to "correct the record with the facts" but that Gray had not done so. At the time of Byrd's charge Ziegler described the accusation as "reprehensible, unfortunate, unfair and incorrect" and he was asked today whether the same description could correctly be applied to Gray's agreement.

"Our references in this particular matter went to the statements that were made in the committee," Ziegler said. "We support Mr. Gray. Mr. Gray is our nominee, the President supports him fully but we do not associate ourselves with any statement that suggests that Mr. Dean probably lied in that instance."

Mr. Nixon returned to the White House tonight after a five-day stay in Key Biscayne.