

Decision Near on Bugging Inquiry Rules

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WASHINGTON, April 15 — The White House is nearing a decision on the terms under which staff members would be permitted to participate in the Senate investigation of the Watergate episode, Administration sources said today.

A series of unannounced meetings late last week were devoted to developing a position considerably less rigid than President Nixon's current insistence that none of his present or former aides would appear before the committee, the sources said. H. R. Haldeman, the White House chief of staff, was reported to be the key man in evolving the new strategy.

Former Attorney General John N. Mitchell participated in the most recent meetings, which took place yesterday.

In an interview with news reporters for the Columbia Broadcasting System at LaGuardia Airport in New York last night, Mr. Mitchell all but confirmed that Mr. Haldeman and other aides would appear before the select Senate committee headed by Senator Sam J. Ervin Jr., Democrat of North Carolina.

Asked whether Mr. Haldeman or other White House staff members had anything to hide, Mr. Mitchell replied:

"I don't believe so, and I think that their testimony in the proper form at the proper time will show that."

Conference Reported

United Press International reported yesterday that Mr. Nixon had conferred with Mr. Mitchell, who for a time managed the President's 1972 re-election campaign. This could not be confirmed. Neither Ronald L. Ziegler, the White House

press secretary, nor Gerald L. Warren, his deputy, responded to repeated requests for clarification of the matter.

Mr. Ziegler said last week that conversations between the committee and unnamed White House representatives were continuing, but there was no indication that committee members or staff members took part in yesterday's meetings.

Mr. Mitchell said that he himself was eager to appear before the Watergate committee, that he "just can't wait to get down there."

Senator Howard H. Baker Jr. of Tennessee, the ranking Republican on the committee, said he was "very glad" that Mr. Mitchell planned to cooperate. He said he did not take Mr. Mitchell's comment about testimony from others as a White House pronouncement, but remarked that Mr. Mitchell's participation in meetings there gave his words added weight.

Mr. Mitchell said that as a result of "these negotiations that are going on between the people in the White House and Senator Ervin's committee, they will come to an accommodation where everybody in the White House that has been remotely involved will testify."

No Hint on Rules

But he gave no hint of what the ground rules of the testimony might be.

At another point, he said he thought that "everybody who's involved, or has been stated to be involved, will come forward" to testify.

One possibility suggested by both committee sources and some White House staff members in recent days has been testimony under oath by Presidential aides with the proviso that questions be restricted to Watergate and associated events and that no confidential

communication between an aide and Mr. Nixon be discussed.

In an interview last night, Mr. Mitchell also indicated that his wife, Martha, would testify if the Watergate committee invited her to.

"She'd be delighted to," he said. "God help the committee if she does."

Not long after the break-in at the offices of the Democratic National Committee last June, Mrs. Mitchell publicly called for her husband to resign, speaking vaguely about "the dirty business" that was going on in political Washington.

Mr. Mitchell subsequently left the Nixon campaign and returned to the practice of law in New York. He described the phrase "dirty business" as an expression of dislike for politics generally, not an allusion to the Watergate scandal.