

A String of White House Denials

By Jack Nelson
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President Nixon's terse announcement of developments in the Watergate case ended ten months of White House denials of administration involvement in political espionage operations.

Shortly after the stern-faced President ended his press conference yesterday, White House press secretary

Ronald Ziegler told reporters that Mr. Nixon's announcement was "the operative statement . . . the other statements are inoperative."

Statements now "inoperative" include earlier comments by Mr. Nixon that while he was "puzzled" by "this very bizarre incident," he was completely satisfied that there was no administration involvement.

Ever since Ziegler's dismissal of the case as "a third-rate alleged burglary attempt" on June 19, two days after five men were arrested inside Democratic headquarters in the Watergate, the White House had insisted that no one in the administration was involved.

In fact, only four hours before Mr. Nixon's announcement, the White House said it stood by an August 29 statement by the President denying involvement by any one "presently employed" in the administration.

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FIGURES

In past press briefings Ziegler had defended White House figures who had been publicly linked to political espionage, but yesterday he told reporters that because

of the President's latest statements it would be "inappropriate" to discuss any individuals.

Ziegler, tense and nervous, declined to say whether White House counsel John W. Dean II was innocent of any wrongdoing or whether the White House stood behind a March 26 statement that Dean had had no prior knowledge of the Watergate case. On that day the Los Angeles Times quoted convicted Watergate conspirator James W. McCord Jr. as saying he had been told that Dean did have prior knowledge.

One of Ziegler's most heated denials of White House involvement in political espionage came on January 29 when he defended his old University of Southern California classmate, Dwight Chapin. Chapin had resigned as the President's appointments secretary after being linked in press reports to political spying.

WHISTLE

Ziegler denied Chapin was forced out because of the reports and also denied a newspaper report quoting a source as saying Chapin had told his superior, H. R. Haldeman, White House chief of staff, that he would "blow the whistle" if forced to resign immediately after the election.

The Watergate case has been met with skepticism ever since June 18 when former attorney general John N. Mitchell, then director of the Committee to Re-Elect the President, identified McCord as proprietor of a private security agency employed to assist with "installation of our security system."

DIRECTOR

It turned out that McCord, who had been caught with four others in the Watergate, was security director for both the re-election committee and the Republican National Committee.

By June 20 news stories were tying administration figures into the incident. One was E. Howard Hunt Jr., a consultant in the White House who worked un-

der Charles W. Colson, special counsel to the President.

On June 22 President Nixon declared the White House had "no involvement whatever" in Watergate.

On July 1, Mitchell resigned as Mr. Nixon's campaign director. A campaign spokesman said it was to "devote more time to his wife" and had nothing to do with the Watergate incident.

Also linked to the case by now was G. Gordon Liddy, a re-election committee official and former White House aide. He was fired by the committee for refusing to cooperate in an FBI investigation. Liddy has refused to talk about his part in the case. McCord and Hunt both have said that Liddy was working for others in the bugging operation.

LINKS

Although newspapers throughout the summer continued to report on White House and re-election committee links to the Watergate case spokesmen insisted that the only persons involved were the five arrested in the building plus Hunt and Liddy.

On August 29 President Nixon told reporters a special White House investigation by Dean found that "no one in this administration presently employed was involved in this very bizarre incident."

The President said "what really hurts in matters of this sort is not the fact that

they occur because overzealous people in campaigns do things that are wrong. What really hurts is if you try to cover it up."

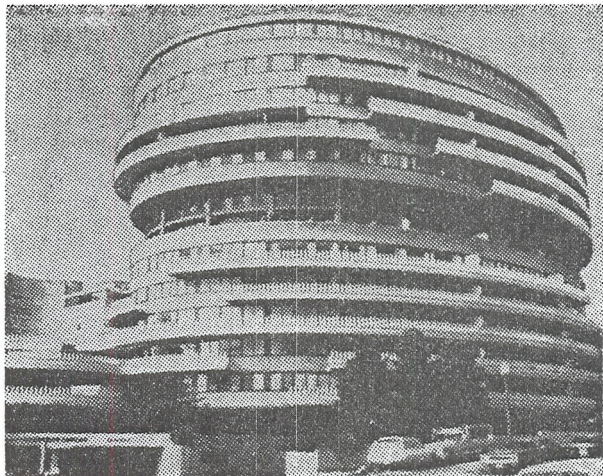
INDICTED

On September 15 a federal grand jury indicted seven men — Hunt, Liddy and McCord and the other four men arrested in the Watergate. And on October 5, President Nixon said that the FBI had conducted a massive investigation in the case because he had wanted to be sure that no White House staffer or person in a position of "major responsibility" had had anything to do with the bugging.

However continuing news reports about the use of campaign funds to finance the bugging and other political espionage put the White House under pressure to say something substantive about Watergate.

The pressure mounted after Hunt and four of those arrested in Watergate pleaded guilty last January and a trial of Liddy and McCord left questions of involvement of higher-ups unresolved. Liddy and McCord were convicted but neither testified at the trial.

U.S. District Judge John J. Sirica who presided over the trial expressed dissatisfaction that "all the facts" had not come out and said he hoped a special Senate committee investigating Watergate would get to the bottom of it.



The Watergate — it started here June 19, 1972