

Is the President Talking to Anyone at All?

Washington

TALKING TO President Nixon about Watergate is, it seems as difficult as talking to Mrs. Marvin Mandel about divorce. The receptivity is just not there.

Speaking for Richard Nixon is equally impossible these days. Nobody seems able to get it just right, even those who try, like Maryland's Governor Mandel, to communicate through the public prints.

Take, for instance, J. Fred Buzhardt Jr., the President's special counsel on Watergate. On June 27, he sent a long, accusatory document up to the Ervin committee, which was meant to discountenance dangerous John W. Dean 3d, then on the witness stand.

The manuscript was read aloud by Senator Daniel Inouye (Dem-Hawaii), and one of the lines, charged Dean with being "perhaps unwittingly, the principal author or the political and constitutional crisis that Watergate now epitomizes."

This got a big laugh in the caucus room. The next day, the Buzhardt "hypothesis" was disavowed in San Clemente.

"It is not the President's position, it is not the White House position," explained Deputy Secretary Gerald Warren, making it perfectly clear that the President's lawyer does not confer with his clients.

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Mary McGrory

NEXT TO step forward was Melvin R. Laird, the former secretary of defense and the new "domestic czar." He told Washington Post reporter David Broder that Ronald Ziegler's days as press secretary were numbered.

"I think it's good to have some other press spokesman for a while," Laird said in a tape-recorded interview. "I think those changes will be made."

But he was wrong. From San Clemente came the putdown, from an unidentified source, possibly the press spokesman himself.

"The observation that Ziegler's usefulness is impaired is not shared by the President," said a nameless voice.

The incident raises some question about Laird's closeness to, or influence with the President. Previously he had gone on the floor of the House to assure his former colleagues that there would be no escalation of the Cambodian bombing if they would let the President send out the B52's for 45 more days. As he spoke, apparently, the bombing was increased by 50 per cent.

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THE NEXT spokesperson, and the most appalling to come to grief, has access, surely, and would under ordinary circumstances be considered authoritative to the point of infallibility. The President's younger daughter, Julie, the only member of the family who is willing to discuss Watergate, gave a birthday interview to Helen Thomas of the UPI and Frances Lewine of AP on July 5.

She made the most gripping statement of all. She said that the Nixons had had a family council about Watergate and that her father played devil's advocate for resignation.

The next day she suffered the fate of all surrogates. The deputy press secretary did not call young Mrs. Eisenhower's revelation inoperative, but he said that kicking the idea of resignation around the family circle did not mean there was "serious consideration" of that course. It was light mental exercise, possibly a substitute for Scrabble.

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THE PRESIDENT has predictably declined to appear before the Ervin committee, and has not held a press conference in three months. Who speaks to him? It must be concluded that the polls are the only voice he listens to.

The latest from Gallup he must find reassuring in a rather sour way. Seventy-one per cent of the American people do not believe him, and believe instead that he was involved either in the break-in, the cover-up or both. That's the bad news. But the good news for him is that only 18 per cent of the people think he should be compelled to leave office. He must surely feel no self-consciousness about remaining as the leader of a country that prefers to accept being lied to by its chief magistrate rather than to face up to the awful and unknown of doing something about it.

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