

Firm Stand

Nixon Passes An Easy Quiz On Watergate

President Nixon said yesterday that he would not resign because he refuses "to be a party to the destruction of the presidency of the United States."

"Resignation is an easy co-out," Mr. Nixon told more than 1900 members of the Executive Club of Chicago in an extended question and answer session. "It might satisfy some of my good easy partisans who might rather not have Watergate hanging over them."

But, the President added, there could never be a strong presidency if he resigned, because any president could be forced from office "by simply leveling some charges."

Beginning another effort to rebuild his standing with the electorate through a series of public appearances, Mr. Nixon replied confidently to 14 questions. He displayed none of the nervousness of gesture and tremulousness of voice that he exhibited at his March 6 news conference, and he was well received.

The questions were far less pointed than those the President is accustomed to dealing with in Washington, and no one asked him about the conflict in his accounts of a crucial March 21, 1973, meeting with former White House counsel John W. Dean III.

White House spokesman had said Mr. Nixon would be prepared to explain the conflict. But without being asked Mr. Nixon only alluded briefly to the March 21 meeting, and he did not clear up the confusion resulting from his past statements. In fact, his language was so ambiguous that it added further uncertainty.

In a prepared statement

released on Aug. 15, 1973, Mr. Nixon said of the March 21, 1973 meeting: "I was told then that funds had been raised for payment to the (Watergate) defendants. . . . But I was told only that the money had been used for attorneys' fees and family support, not that it had been paid to procure silence from the recipients."

On March 6, at his news conference, the President said Dean had told him that "payments had been made

Back Page Col. 1

From Page 1

to the defendants for the purpose of keeping them quiet, not simply for their defense."

Yesterday, Mr. Nixon, speaking of himself in the third person, reiterated that at the March 21 session "The President learned for the first time that payments had been made to the defendants."

As to what he was told of the purpose of the payments, Mr. Nixon commented that he wanted to correct "what may have been a misapprehension when I spoke to the press on March 6 in Washington."

Then he added:

"It was alleged that the payments that had been made to the defendants were made for the purpose of keeping them still."

Mr. Nixon noted that H. R. Haldeman, John D. Ehrlichman and John N. Mitchell — three former associates now under indictment — denied that the payments constitut-

ed hush money, and "they certainly should be allowed the right in court to establish their innocence."

His language was less than precise, but it appeared that Mr. Nixon was saying that Dean had charged on March 21 that the payments were hush money, but that Mr. Nixon had no way of knowing whether his version was true or whether his other, senior associates were telling the truth.

The distinction is central. If Mr. Nixon knew that hush money had been paid he could be charged with misprision of felony for failing to report the fact to law enforcement agencies. But if he had only accusations that weren't substantiated — indeed contradicted by others — the misprision statute, which uses the word "knowledge," would not apply.

But Mr. Nixon still failed to explain why his statement of August 15 had said Dean did not mention "hush money." The President has now taken three different and distinct positions on what Dean told him.

New York Times