

Sirica's Finale as Chief On a Day to Remember

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WASHINGTON, March 18—It was another of those remarkable days in the Watergate affair and, one again, Judge John J. Sirica was in the middle of it all: He ruled today

that he would turn over a secret Watergate grand jury report bearing on President Nixon's possible role in the affair to the House Judiciary Committee, which is studying impeachment.

The ruling came on his last day as chief judge for the Federal Court in the District of Columbia. Judge Sirica who will be 70 years old tomorrow, was forced because of his age to give up his post. He will remain as a judge, however, and will continue his 14-month involvement in the Watergate case by trying the former aides of President Nixon indicted in the Watergate conspiracy.

His fellow judges gathered at the Mayflower Hotel at the 35th annual conference for the judges of this circuit. At lunch there was a short ceremony.

Judge George L. Hart Jr., who will succeed Judge Sirica as Chief Judge, presented him with a ship's clock inside a brass-bound box, with an engraved plate.

Judge Hart said he would not dwell on "Johnny's" service on the Watergate affair because Judge Sirica had been praised "far beyond" anything Judge Hart could add.

"It's hard for a person like myself to say how I really feel today," Judge Sirica replied.

Someone passed him a note with a question on it and he read it:

"Does your last day feel like

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a condemned man about to be executed or a bird about to be let out of a cage?"

He said he felt like "a bird about to be let out of a gilded cage."

He was referring, he said, to the improvements that had been made to the Federal courthouse since he became Chief Judge.

Judge Sirica, who deals in power with none of the trappings of fancy words or surroundings, was trailed by reporters, bright lights and television cameramen through the Mayflower lobby. Again and again when asked to comment about today's ruling on the grand jury report, he said the same words:

"I'll tell you boys what I told the other fellows. My opinion speaks for itself. I'm not going to comment on the opinion."

In Line for Phone Call

Each time he did it with a smile, never angered by the repeated attempts to interview him, never dodging the lights or the back-peddling reporters who thrust microphones at him as he walked.

When the reporters were gone, he stood in line to use a pay telephone to call his office.

Once just another of the 15 members of the Federal District Court bench in Washington, Judge Sirica became in the Watergate case a symbol of the power of the courts.

With the first Watergate trial before him, he began in January, 1973, his own questioning of witnesses. He was probing to find connections higher up.

His critics said that was not his job; that he should have dealt only in the narrow issue of the guilt or innocence of the men before him; that his persistence in doing so might one day be reversed on appeal.

Long Terms Threatened

He used the threat of heavy sentences to try to secure cooperation from those found guilty at the first trial.

The whole controversy of the tape recordings made in President Nixon's offices came before him and he ordered nine of them turned over to the special prosecutor's office, an action upheld by the Court of Appeals. When some of the tapes were found to be missing and recordings apparently erased, he turned that over to the Watergate grand juries.

Time Magazine made him its "man of the year" and in the glittering, transient world of this day's glory or shame, he became as much a folk hero as Senator Sam J. Ervin Jr. of the Senate Watergate Committee.

Of his future as a judge trying cases to which he is assigned, he said: "I'll do the best I can."

Chief Judge David L. Bazelon of the Court of Appeals said: "It never went to his head. He never forgot his beginnings."