

Tape Provides No Nixon Link To Milk Funds

By Richard L. Lyons and William Chapman
Washington Post Staff Writers

House Judiciary Committee members listened yesterday to a taped conversation in which President Nixon decided on a 1971 increase in milk price supports and generally agreed it provided no evidence that he acted in response to a promised \$2 million campaign contribu-

tion.

Several Republicans said that the decision, worth several hundred million dollars to the dairy industry, appeared to be a political one based, as the President has conceded, on the belief that Congress would force the increase and that he might as well act first to reap the political benefits.

But most of the President's severest critics said that nothing said in that March 23, 1971, White House meeting linked the price-support increase and the promised campaign money as part of the deal.

Some members said other documentary evidence assembled by the impeachment inquiry staff went further toward showing a link between the two events. The committee has obtained records of the Senate Watergate committee, which has received sworn testimony that reaffirmation of the \$2 million pledge was demanded by John D. Ehrlichman, then a top White House aide, before the price increase was announced.

The committee has requested but not obtained 46 other tapes of White House conversations that it hoped would shed light on the chain of events set off by the President's milk price-support decision — between the time he made it on the afternoon of March 23 and the time it was publicly announced two days later.

The inconclusive picture the committee now has of the milk matter may cause it to call as a witness Charles W. Colson who was the White House contact with the dairy industry at that time. Colson has pleaded guilty to a felony in obstructing justice in the Daniel Ellsberg case and has expressed a willingness to cooperate with prosecutors.

Several members said that

during the final two minutes of the 30-minute taped conversation a voice was heard telling Ehrlichman to inform Colson of the decision. There is disagreement whether President Nixon uttered those words, but witnesses said the next voice heard was clearly that of the President. This showed, members said, that if he had not uttered the words he was present and heard them and did not disapprove. Whether the President knew what Colson was to do with the information is not clear.

The committee staff has said it has information of this sequence of events:

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In 1970, Associated Milk Producers, Inc., a big dairy cooperative, pledged \$2 million through Colson for the President's 1972 re-election campaign. The President knew this when he set aside an Agriculture Department action and ordered the higher price-support levels.

Immediately after the meeting where Mr. Nixon made his decision, the staff said in a memo to committee members, Ehrlichman contacted Colson who immediately contacted Murray Chotiner, former close political associate of the President and then attorney for the dairy interests. Chotiner is now dead.

During the next two days, the staff said, dairy representatives held a series of meetings around the country, reaffirmed their campaign pledge and raised \$25,000 of it. After this occurred, the staff memo said, the price-support increase was announced. The in-

dustry later contributed several hundred thousand dollars to the campaign.

The committee yesterday heard three tapes of presidential conversations, all occurring on March 23, 1971. The first was a telephone call from then Secretary of the Treasury John B. Connally who, according to the staff memo, stressed the dairy industry's political power and potential for making campaign contributions. Committee members said this tape gave them little help because they could hear only the President's responses to whatever Connally was saying.

The second tape was of a 50-minute meeting that morning between the President and dairymen, in which he reportedly thanked them for past political support but made no mention of money.

The third was the 30-minute afternoon meeting of the President and seven top aides when he made his decision.

Rep. Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.), one of the President's

severest critics, said of the afternoon meeting: "They never talked about money as a consideration."

Rep. Elizabeth Holtzman (D-N.Y.) said, however, that the tape made "a fairly damaging case."

Rep. Harold V. Froehlich (R-Wis.) conservative supporter of the President, said: "You can read into it anything you want."

Rep. Jerome Waldie (D-Calif.), who favors impeachment now, told one reporter that "the tape is open to interpretation both way," but told another it reinforced his belief that "price supports were increased in response to campaign contributions."

Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.), another strong critic of the President, told one reporter "it's not clear" whether there was a connection between price supports and campaign money, but told another the tape was "very damning."

Rep. James Mann (D-S.C.) said: "There was a discussion of what political benefits

would flow from the decision but nothing was said about money."

Rep. Lawrence J. Hogan (R-Md.) said, as others have, that he didn't think the milk or IIT cases would provide grounds for impeachment. "If it [a committee recommendation to impeach] comes, it will be in the area of Watergate and the cover-up," said Hogan.

James D. St. Clair, the President's counsel, said yesterday morning he considered it "very doubtful" on the basis of evidence he has heard at the closed committee sessions that the committee would vote for impeachment. But Ronald L. Ziegler, Mr. Nixon's press secretary, said last week he would not be surprised if the committee did recommend im-

The committee moves on to

peachment. day to examine behind closed committee sessions that doors staff evidence on other by the White House "plumbers" and other acts of domestic surveillance.