

Ziegler tries to keep his cool fielding questions on Watergate

By Peter Lisagor

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WASHINGTON — The Watergate affair keeps coming back to the White House doorstep like an abandoned mutt.

Presidential press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler has tried valiantly to ban or mute the subject with disdain, weak humor, injured innocence and a thinly concealed anger.

When the case was before the grand jury and then in the courts, Ziegler deflected newsmen's questions on the ground that the judicial process would take its course and it would be improper to comment until it did.

THERE WAS a suspicion within the White House that most of the barrages suffered by the White House press spokesman were inspired by the presidential campaign and the zest for politics it uncorked among reporters. When President Nixon won by an overwhelming majority, the hope was that Watergate would



Ronald L. Ziegler

The affair won't go away

be buried alongside George McGovern.

Court convictions were being appealed, and that provided some further refuge, administration officials figured.

And then came the Senate confirmation hearings of L. Patrick Gray III, nominated by the President to be the second director of the FBI in its storied history, dominated by J. Edgar Hoover.

Gray's known penchant for politics prompted even the professional liberals to laud their late nemesis, Hoover, for his scrupulous nonpartisanship.

BUT ZIEGLER'S problem

arises less from Gray's partisanship than from the role played by White House employees, notably presidential counsel John W. Dean III, during the FBI's investigation last year into the bugging and burglary of the Democrats' national headquarters.

According to Gray's testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Dean sat in on FBI interviews of White House aides, against Gray's personal wishes. Gray also recalled that he probably complained about it.

On Tuesday, deputy press secretary Gerald Warren confirmed that Dean was present during the FBI interviews. Warren dismissed it as a trivial matter, saying that the White House employees requested Dean's presence.

ON WEDNESDAY, Ziegler was back at the press room rostrum with the intelligence elicited by a question, that he had run into Dean in a White House corridor and that Dean

had said he was "not aware of any complaint" about his sitting in while the FBI interviewed White House staffers. Ziegler shrugged off Gray's reported displeasure.

That loosed the floodgates. For 40 minutes, Ziegler danced around, dodged, diverted questions about why Dean sat in.

He objected to the word "interrogated" as a characterization of what the FBI did with White House types, and rejected the suggestion that the witnesses might have been less than candid in Dean's presence for fear of losing their jobs.

DEAN'S PRESENCE was "pro forma," Ziegler noted. The counsel did no counseling, said nothing. That conformed to what Gray told his Senate interrogators.

Ziegler denied that Dean had given FBI material to anyone, and when he was asked to produce Dean to answer the questions, he looked like he had been victimized by a brazen act of impertinence.

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