

Peterson Says Nixon Hinted at FBI Job Offer

By Ronald J. Ostrow

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President Nixon, in the midst of an April 1973 briefing on Watergate, asked Assistant Attorney General Henry E. Petersen, then in charge of the case, if the post of FBI director interested him, Petersen has testified.

Petersen's grand jury testimony about the incident has been turned over to the House Judiciary Committee for its impeachment inquiry. The committee Thursday subpoenaed the White House recording of the April 19, 1973, conversation.

The Nixon-Petersen conversation was the second time the White House is known to have discussed the FBI post with a public official involved in Watergate-related matters.

The first was an April 6, 1973, offer of the post by John D. Ehrlichman, then Mr. Nixon's chief domestic affairs adviser, to U.S. District Court Judge W. Matt Byrne, then presiding over the Pentagon Papers trial. Byrne, who was interviewed by House Impeachment investigators here May 5, said he exchanged greetings with Mr. Nixon in San Clemente, Calif., the same day Ehrlichman made the offer.

When that incident first was made public, Byrne said he told Ehrlichman he could not consider the offer while the trial was in progress.

Petersen and John W. Humber, the Justice Depart-

ment public information director, declined comment on Petersen's grand jury testimony.

But sources familiar with the testimony said Petersen, a career man at the Justice Department, recalled that Mr. Nixon asked if he would like to head the FBI.

At the time of their discussion, the nomination of Mr. Nixon's first choice for the post, L. Patrick Gray III, had been withdrawn after it became apparent the Senate would not confirm him.

Petersen was meeting regularly with Mr. Nixon at the White House in April 1973, giving him frequent reports on the progress of the Watergate cover-up investigation.

Petersen testified that after he made it clear he was not seeking the post, the President said he was not offering him the job.

The April 19 discussion with Petersen was not among the edited transcripts of presidential conversations on Watergate released by the White House.

In including the April 19 Petersen-Nixon discussion among the 45 conversations it subpoenaed Thursday, the House committee made no mention of the discussion of the FBI directorship.

"In his meeting on April 19, 1973, the President and Petersen spoke about the Watergate investigation," explained a committee staff memo justifying the subpoena. "Petersen gave the President a report on the progress of the investigation."