



JOHN J. WILSON
... advisers' attorney

Case Role Ill Defined For Lawyer

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By Edward Walsh
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John J. Wilson, described by his law partner as "the best trial lawyer in Washington," is playing an increasingly important if not yet clearly defined role in the White House's handling of the escalating Watergate scandal.

Wilson, 71, a former government prosecutor and a staunch Republican, is the lawyer who has been retained by President Nixon's two top domestic advisers, H.R. (Bob) Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, in the Watergate case.

Beyond that, White House officials themselves are speculating that Wilson is acting as the President's own attorney as well in the Watergate case. Only Mr. Nixon, Wilson, Haldeman, Ehrlichman and perhaps one or two other top presidential advisers know exactly what Wilson's role is.

In a telephone interview yesterday, Wilson declined to discuss this speculation or what role, if any, he is playing for the President. It is known, however, that the highly respected lawyer has met twice with the President since he was retained by Haldeman and Ehrlichman on the morning of April 17.

The first meeting occurred April 19 and included, according to White House spokesmen, a thorough discussion of the Watergate affair. Wilson met again with Mr. Nixon Wednesday afternoon.

Wilson would not say yesterday whether these meetings were attended by others besides himself and the President. He said he does not have additional meetings scheduled, with Mr. Nixon, although he has met almost every day since April 17 with his two clients.

Wilson had never met Mr. Nixon, Haldeman or Ehrlichman before he was drawn into the Watergate case and he said he has no idea why the two presidential aides chose him to represent them. "I imagine," he said, "that they had someone recommend me."

That would not be surprising, according to his law partner, John J. Carmody Jr., because among D.C. lawyers Wilson has "an excellent reputation." Carmody calls him a "smart, tough, good lawyer."

Wilson was born in Washington on July 25, 1901, and earned his law degree from George Washington University—where he is now a member of the board of trustees—at the age of 20.

Wilson became a government prosecutor during President Herbert Hoover's administration, rising to chief assistant U.S. attorney for the District of Columbia before he entered private practice about 1940. The bulk of his work has been in civil cases and his great love, as well as his expertise, is in the courtroom before a judge or jury, Carmody said.

A conservative dresser, and far from the flamboyant figure that is often associated with top trial lawyers, Wilson, according to Carmody, "is totally confident" in the courtroom.

"He never lets a witness or even a judge browbeat him," Carmody said.

Carmody describes his partner's politics as "very conservative Republican."

In 1962, Wilson was named "Lawyer of the Year" by the D.C. Bar Association. During his career he had represented a number of major corporate clients, including the National Bank of Washington, where he is general counsel, and the American steel industry, which he represented after President Truman seized the mills in 1952. His longest case stretched over more than 20 years. In it Wilson represented Interhandel, a Swiss holding company, in a dispute over the U.S. government's seizure of an American affiliate of the Swiss firm during World War II.

Until now, Wilson's best-known political client was Sen. Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.), whom he helped represent in a successful libel suit in 1969 against publisher Ralph Ginzburg.

Three times, Carmody said, Wilson has been asked by U.S. District Court judges to represent them in appeals of the judges' decisions to the U.S. Court of Appeals.

Wilson is married and lives with his wife in Northwest Washington. They have no children.