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Ziegler Recants; Says Haldeman,

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White House press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler admitted yesterday that he was wrong and that dismissed presidential counsel John W. Dean III was right about a controversial telephone call the President reportedly made to Dean on March 26.

Ziegler was responding to a Newsweek magazine report that Dean declared Ziegler's report that such a call

took place was a "flat-out lie."

In answer to questions yesterday, the press secretary said it was not President Nixon but H. R. (Bob) Haldeman, former White House chief of staff, who telephoned Dean in March.

The original questioning was on March 26 at a Key Biscayne, Fla., news conference after a Los Angeles Times story quoting Watergate defendant James W. McCord as having said that Dean had prior knowledge of the Watergate break-in.

At that time, Ziegler branded the story about Dean having prior knowledge of the break-in as totally false.

"Secondly," Ziegler added on March 26, "I should tell you that the President has talked to John Dean this morning, and discussed the story with him, and following that conversation, and based on that conversation, I will again flatly deny any prior knowledge on the part of Mr. Dean regarding the Watergate matter."

"Now, I should also tell you that the President has complete confidence in Mr. Dean and wanted me again, here this morning, to publicly express the President's absolute, total confidence in Mr. Dean in this regard."

Questioned yesterday about Dean's assertion, quoted in Newsweek, that Mr. Nixon "never called me that day," Ziegler said Dean's assurances that he was not involved in Watergate "were communicated to

Not Nixon, Called Dean

the President" through Haldeman.

Ziegler recalled that on March 26 he was in a long meeting with the President, Haldeman and former aide John D. Ehrlichman involving the agreement on release of the last American prisoners in North Vietnam.

At the end of the meeting, Ziegler said he discussed the Los Angeles Times story about Dean with the President and then held his news briefing.

The President said he had

received personal assurances from Dean that he was not involved in Watergate, Ziegler said, and on that basis he made his statement. He said he also had talked to Dean the night before when he first heard of the story and received the same assurances.

The mistake was his, not the President's, Ziegler said yesterday. Asked why he did not correct it later, since stories were promptly printed saying that Mr. Nixon had talked personally to Dean, Ziegler said he did

not again consider the matter until the Newsweek story appeared this week.

"It was my impression that the President had talked to Dean," Ziegler said. "It was an incorrect impression. It was Mr. Haldeman who made the call."

According to Dean's associates, the former counsel did receive a telephone call later from Mr. Nixon, on Easter Sunday, April 22. On that occasion, Dean has told investigators, Mr. Nixon said to him that he had been

"kidding" in an earlier conversation in which the president allegedly asked Dean to estimate the cost of buying the Watergate conspirators' silence.

Dean has told investigators that, shortly before the conspirators were to be sentenced on March 23, the President asked him for such an estimate and that Dean said the cost would be \$1 million. According to Dean's version of events, Mr. Nixon told him that there would be no problem paying that amount.