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Watergate Probe Gains Momentum

WASHINGTON — (AP) — The Watergate investigation is gaining momentum after President Nixon abandoned the blanket claim of innocence for White House aides.

Nixon said yesterday he will send his aides to testify publicly as demanded by Senate investigators preparing for hearings next month.

He said he launched a new presidential inquiry into the matter last month, about the time Watergate burglar James McCord began telling his story to a Senate committee and a federal grand jury.

This time the President's inquiry is being conducted by persons outside the White House staff, some of whose members reportedly have been implicated in McCord's secret testimony.

No Questions

Nixon disclosed his actions in a three-minute statement to newsmen at the White House. No questions were permitted.

He said he met Sunday with Attorney General Richard G. Kleindienst and Asst. Attorney General Henry Pe-

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tersen who gets reports of grand jury testimony.

"I can report today that there have been major developments in the case," Nixon said, "...real progress has been made in finding the truth."

He wouldn't elaborate on the developments or name anyone who might be under suspicion. But he also said he has told investigators that no officials are exempt from prosecution, and said he'll suspend any government employe indicted in the case and fire anyone convicted.

White House Press Secretary Ronald L. Ziegler said that supersedes Nixon's longstanding claim that administration officials have been cleared, because the latest statement stems from "serious charges" that Nixon said first reached him March 21.

The President's original claim was made more than seven months ago on Aug. 29 at a California news conference. Nixon said then that presidential counsel John W. Dean III had concluded an independent investigation of the burglary and wiretapping of Democratic offices at the Watergate building.

Nixon said then "categorically" that Dean's probe indicated nobody then in the White House or the administration was involved. However, reliable sources say McCord has testified that another conspirator, G. Gordon Liddy, told him that Dean himself helped plan illegal bugging and related activities.