

Nixon Knew Of Coverup, Sources Say

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As early as last December, President Nixon was warned by members of his own staff that presidential aides were deeply involved in the Watergate bugging and a subsequent coverup, according to highly reliable sources in the executive branch.

On several occasions between winter and early spring, the President was told that former Attorney General John N. Mitchell and White House counsel John W. Dean III probably were deeply involved in both the illegal electronic surveillance and the coverup, the sources reported.

On each occasion the President said he was anxious to learn the truth but maintained that Mitchell and Dean had denied any involvement in the Watergate affair, the sources said. "Give me some evidence," one quoted the President as saying.

ANNOUNCEMENT

The President did not make a public statement on the possible involvement of his aides until last Tuesday, at least four months after he had reportedly been warned of the problem.

In the week before the President's announcement, the Watergate prosecutors had informed Assistant Attorney General Henry E. Peterson that they were on the verge of indicting several Nixon administration officials, according to several sources.

The prosecutors insisted that Mr. Nixon personally be told of the impending indictments and that the President be asked to order members of his staff to cooperate. Deputy White House press

secretary Gerald Warren said last night that there would be no comment on the

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OBSTRUCTING

The sources, all of them men long considered deeply loyal to the President, said that in January, special presidential counsel Charles W. Colson and two other presidential assistants told Mr. Nixon that persons in his administration were obstructing justice and that action should be taken.

On three separate occasions, the sources said, Colson personally recommended to the President that he "get rid of" some people. An associate of Colson told the Washington Post an almost identical account yesterday.

Reached for comment yesterday, Colson denied that he had warned the President, adding that he would not discuss private communications between himself and the President with anyone — including the press, the federal grand jury investigating the Watergate affair, and the Senate investigation committee.

Colson associates, however, confirmed that Colson had warned the President, but said that Colson would deny it.

REASONS

According to the associate, Colson's denial was issued for two purposes: to avoid any acknowledgement that the President was forewarned of his aides' involvement in the bugging and coverup, and fear that Dean might "retaliate" by impli-

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cating Colson before the grand jury.

Colson has denied any involvement in the Watergate bugging and last week supplied the prosecution in the case with documentary evidence of a White House coverup in the case. One independent source described the evidence as "self-serving," but said it none-

theless is convincing in its allegations that others participated in a coverup.

The sources said that Colson has gone so far as to tell associates that the President has been "betrayed" by some of his aides.

AGREE

There was general agreement this weekend among the sources that the President had been urged for months to take action on the Watergate.

One source said that John Ehrlichman, the President's chief domestic adviser, was a leading force in urging the President to intensify efforts to clear up the Watergate. Another source, however, said that Ehrlichman had played no such role until late last month.

It is known that at least one attorney for the President's re-election committee visited Ehrlichman early this month to warn him that the Watergate case was about to explode.

Ehrlichman could not be reached for comment yesterday.

In a related development, the New York Times reported sources close to the case as saying that G. Gordon Liddy, — the alleged leader of the Watergate break-in — turned down a White House request that he tell all he knows about the Democratic bugging to the federal grand jury.

The sources said that despite being told of presidential interest, Liddy was adamant in refusing to cooperate with federal prosecutors in the case.

Last month the former official of the Republican Committee for the Re-election of the President was handed an additional eight-month sentence for refusing to testify to the grand jury after being granted immunity from future prosecution.

"Liddy believes that the

President wants him to cooperate," one well-informed source said, "but he still isn't saying anything."

Some government officials are said to believe that Liddy, in refusing to talk, is protecting former Mitchell,

Liddy attended at least three planning meetings in early 1972 with Mitchell, Dean and Jeb Stuart Magruder, a Mitchell deputy on the campaign committee, which have become a focal point of the prosecution inquiry.