

White House Statement

# New Nixon Denial In Watergate Case

Prior  
Knowledge  
'Untrue'

N.Y. Times Service

Miami

The White House denied again yesterday that President Nixon had "prior knowledge" of the Watergate operation or of the alleged coverup by high White House aides.

The statement of denial, approved by the President, was issued by Gerald L. Warren, deputy White House press secretary. It contained a carefully worded denial of presidential involvement in the matter.

"The White House says this morning that any suggestion that the President was aware of the Watergate operation is untrue," the statement said.

"Any suggestion that the President participated in any coverup activity or activities is untrue. Any suggestion that the President ever authorized the offering of clemency to anyone in the case is also false."

COUNSEL

The statement followed published reports that John W. Dean III, the former White House counsel, has told Federal investigators that the President personally thanked him for his role in the attempts to cover up the Watergate scandal.

Reported in the current issue of Newsweek magazine, the statement attributed to Dean is the strongest allegation yet of presidential in-

volvement in the Watergate case.

The Newsweek story was the latest in a series of accounts in which Dean has indicated that he has a potentially embarrassing amount of information that he is willing to use, if necessary, to avoid becoming what he

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has described as the "scapegoat" for the White House.

He has reportedly told Federal prosecutors that he will make this information available to the Grand Jury investigating Watergate only if he is granted immunity from prosecution.

REPORT

Newsweek recounted two incidents that Dean reportedly cited as indicating Mr. Nixon's knowledge and approval of White House efforts to stifle any reverberations of the Watergate incident. The first allegedly took place in September, and the second, last December.

The first, Newsweek reported, took place in Mr. Nixon's office, where Dean, the President and H. R. Haldeman, the President's chief of staff, discussed the success of Dean's effort to "keep the lid on."

Dean quoted Mr. Nixon, in the Newsweek account, as having said to Dean: "Good job, John."

In the second incident, Dean reportedly conveyed to John Ehrlichman, Mr. Nixon's chief assistant for domestic affairs at that time, a plea from the lawyer of E. Howard Hunt Jr., one of the Watergate defendants, for a reduction in Hunt's sentence.

According to Newsweek, Dean conveyed the plea to presidential adviser John Ehrlichman, who went into the President's office and

"later came back with what he said was Mr. Nixon's promise of executive clemency for Hunt."

COMMENT

The Newsweek article generated a flood of questions at yesterday's White House news briefing, but official spokesmen refused to comment on assertions made in that or other stories of government involvement in the affair.

However, Warren told newsmen he would issue "an over-all comment which I think is merited at this time."

He then read the statement and added:

"Having said that, I would like to call your attention to our position, which we will maintain throughout this matter.

"When you have investigations, grand juries, courts and the Ervin select committee all trying to get the facts and sort out the true from the false in this matter, we are not going to comment on various charges and countercharges as they arise.

"(I am not going to be able to get into detailed questions and answers on various matters," he said.

VIEW

There was little doubt among observers here that the statement was issued in response to the latest series of allegations.

That feeling was strengthened by the fact that the statement came after discussions among the President, his press secretary, Ronald L. Ziegler, and his newly appointed special assistant, General Alexander M. Haig Jr. who was summoned to Florida Sunday night.

Haig's appearance here and yesterday's statement confirm indications that the President has been unable to

break away from the scandal around his administration.

In his nationally televised address of April 30, which advisers had hoped would lay Watergate to rest, the President complained of the distraction forced by the issue.

ACTIVITY

Since then, except for a long-scheduled summit meeting with West German Chancellor Willy Brandt and the release of long-completed statements such as the State of the World report and a report on Radio Free Europe, the President's activities have continued to revolve around the damage done by Watergate.

During Mr. Nixon's four days of seclusion at nearby Key Biscayne and an overnight trip to the Bahamas, nearly all reports of presidential activity have touched on White House operations affected by the scandal.

GUIDELINES

Yesterday conference with Haig and Ziegler was described as one of "discussions about the future White House operation and other administrative details."

Warren would not comment further on the new guidelines on executive privilege issued last week by White House Counsel Leonard Garment.

Although the White House asserted that the guidelines were designed to "hold to a minimum" the use of executive privilege by White House staff members — present and former — to refrain from answering questions, the statement appears to extend that privilege to new areas.

PRIVILEGE

Some lawyers have complained that the President is, for the first time, trying to extend the use of executive privilege to judicial proceedings, including grand juries, in a manner that effectively closes inquiries about presidential involvement.

In light of those charges, White House aides have been asked dozen of times to clarify the issue and have refused.

"I can't get into specifics," Warren replied when asked to clarify the extend to which guidelines had been broadened or curtailed.

Is it not true, he was asked, that the new guidelines extend executive privilege to judicial proceedings for the first time?

"I have no comment on that," he said.

Wadren also turned aside

all questions designed to learn, specifically, when the President first learned of the Watergate affair. That, he said, was made clear in the President's April 30 address.

In that speech, Mr. Nixon said that until March 1973, he believed no one in the

White House was involved in the Watergate incident.

In Newsweek's article, it is alleged that Dean contends the president thanked him for his work in the matter as early as last September.