

Washington Post

The following is excerpted from an exchange between Vice President Spiro Agnew and University of Virginia students at a Student Legal Forum last Tuesday in Charlottesville.

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Q: I understand that you may be reluctant to comment on the Watergate affair, so I will phrase my question in the following manner: If the President of the United States, whoever he may be, were found to have taken an active part with key staff aides in any obstruction of justice, or if a President of the United States knew of the activity of White House aides in an obstruction of justice and told the American people otherwise on national television, do you think either of these activities would be grounds for impeachment?

A: Let me respond to your question by indicating that in a matter as volatile as this, and as subject to misinterpretation as this, to speculate on a conjectural set of circumstances that have already been denied by the President affirmatively just yesterday, in a very unequivocal statement from Key Biscayne, would be a disservice.

I would say also that I have made my position on the Watergate matter known via national television on April 25, 1973, in a statement in which I basically said this: That it's unfair to comment on the substance of the matter. Certainly no one should know better than people at a university that turns out such outstanding law graduates.

May I explain why I say that? There has been a great amount of speculation, there has been a great amount of hearsay, there's been a great amount of accusations from sources who do not have the courage to reveal themselves.

And there may very well turn out to be substantial proof of substantial involvement in these crimes. The proper investigative forum for that under our criminal system and justice, under our protections of the Constitution, is a grand jury proceeding and not what you might call an exploratory procedure in the national media. Now, I understand the national media's desire to be of assistance in informing the people and I am not criticizing their function in its entirety, but I would point out that in their eagerness to be certain that they get the facts—and potential facts—across to the public, they have in my mind to some extent transgressed the boundaries of propriety, in certain instances.

The Washington Post, whom I seek to pick no fight with [applause] at the present time, the organ that has just been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for its work [applause] in the Watergate matter [applause], published on April 25, 1973, on its front page, the following story; and I'm just going to read a couple of paragraphs, and I'm going to ask those of you here tonight who are legal students, or those who have a legal background, to think for yourselves how you would assess the persuasive impact of this story and what impression the story would have on you when you begin reading it and after you have read the paragraph.

"President Nixon's chief legal counsel," said the story, "John W. Dean III, said prior to the bugging of the Watergate that the operation would have to be carried out in a manner that then-Attorney General John N. Mitchell would be able to deny his involvement at a future date, according to information provided a federal grand jury here."

Next paragraph:

"The allegation was made in a memorandum from convicted Watergate conspirator James W. McCord Jr. to the grand jury."

Here's the revealing sentence:

"McCord said that he was told about Dean's statement by his fellow Watergate conspirator G. Gordon Liddy."

So anyone who's ever heard of hearsay knows that this story is based on the fact that McCord said that Liddy said that Dean said that Mitchell was going to deny his involvement. [applause]

Now, to me that turns out to be a double hearsay—at least a double hearsay—statement. I will not defend anyone who is involved in the Watergate matter, whether or not [applause] they are close to the administration and no matter how close to the administration they are. But I do not think that it is proper to convict in the minds of the public a wide range of people against whom the only substantiated information at the present time is hearsay, undisclosed-source rumors, investigative reporting that hasn't been verified. Now when that is verified through the grand jury proceedings, it is perfectly right for it to be reported as fact. But it is not fair to people who are under accusation to be victimized in a blanket sense by what others are saying about them without any reports being substantiated by evidence admissible in a criminal charge. [applause]

Q: Mr. Vice President, there's been much talk of late that the Watergate affair scares some politicians from joining the ranks of the Republican Party as possible political suicide. In Virginia, gubernatorial candidate Mills Godwin made a statement that he would have to re-evaluate the party before joining. How will this scandal affect the party? And what will be the effect on future elections, possibly your own in 1976?

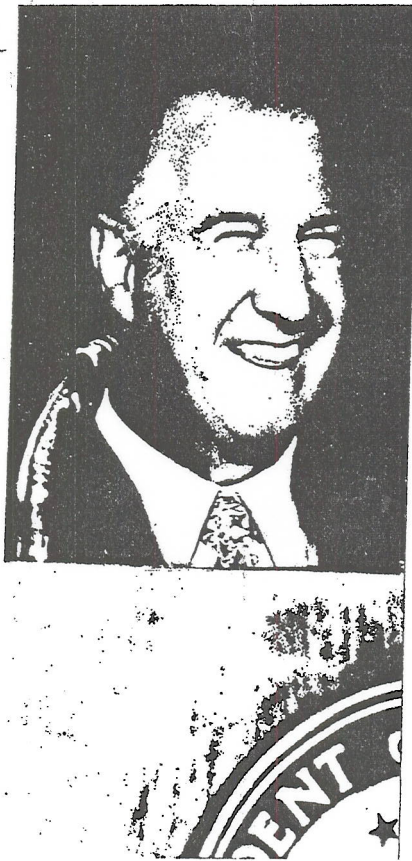
A: Well, it's very difficult to make a judgment of that, the impact of the Watergate matter, until we know exactly what is involved in the Watergate matter—until the completion of the criminal investigations that are going forward, with supervision and protection and further completion of the Senate investigative procedure that will begin next week on national television.

I feel that it's perfectly normal for a person who is contemplating a step as important as changing your political party to have some reservations about what might develop, being totally informed of what could come out of this matter. And consequently I can understand the reluctance of a high Democratic official contemplating making a change of party at this moment.

On the other hand, former Gov. Connally has made his movement in full confidence that the President is untouched by these mat-

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Agnew: 'I Will Reserve My Judgment'



ters, and has been reassured by the President's very direct and forthright assertion that he is indeed untouched by them. There may be some political hay in the Republican Party to be made by making the transfer at a time when it shows a degree of confidence and courage rather than waiting to make sure

that there's a feather bed to land in when you jump. [applause]

Q: Mr. Vice President, the Nixon administration is continuing to press for stringent legislation against pornography and the private use of marijuana, as well as for narrow traditional interpretations of the First Amendment. . . . Doesn't this course of action seem somewhat hypocritical and inconsistent in view of the immorality and corruption in government that seems to have been exposed by the Watergate affair and by the Pentagon Papers trial? [applause]

A: Would you repeat the very last part that I didn't hear?

Q: Doesn't this course of action seem somewhat hypocritical and inconsistent in view of the immorality and corruption in government that seems to have been exposed by the Watergate affair and by the Pentagon Papers trial?

A: Well, I think that you've answered your own question by the use of the words "that seems to be exposed." [applause and boos]

We all know that what appears to be, at least in degree and accuracy, isn't always what it turns out to be in the end. And again, I do not want to leave the impression that it is my expectation that everything that's been written about the Watergate matter is going to turn out to be absolutely false. Because I don't think that. However, I will reserve my judgment until the facts are in . . .

Q: Mr. Vice President, in your criticism of *The Washington Post* and its coverage of the Watergate, don't you feel that had it not been for the efforts of, I quote, "a vigorous free press" that most of the American people would never have even heard of Watergate? [applause]

A: I think that there has been a contribution made by elements of the press in this matter. I think the importance of the contribution has been overblown in self-adulating rhetoric by certain members of the media, and this is totally unrequired. On the other hand, I believe that the Watergate matter would have eventually reached the public attention with simply the reporting on the facts which—out of the diligent investigations, which I applaud—came to light, without the kind of double hearsay and the kind of undisclosed-source information and the kind of character assassination that has been prevalent in recent reporting.

On the one hand, I applaud their efforts and I applaud the results, but I cannot applaud any more than Sen. Proxmire applauded today the methods that are being used. You know there's a very short jump from McCarthyistic techniques to what's going on right now in the Watergate. [applause]

Q: Mr. Vice President, in 1952, as a candidate for vice president, in response to a secret campaign fund of \$18,000, Richard Nixon, in what has become known as the Checkers speech, in an attempt to implicate the Truman administration as corrupt, said, and I quote:

"Take the problem of corruption. You have

read about the mess in Washington. Mr. Stevenson can't clean it up because he was picked by the man, Truman, under whose administration the mess was made. You wouldn't trust the man who made the mess to clean it up. That is Truman. And by the same token you can't trust the man who was picked by the man who made the mess to clean it up, and that is Stevenson."

In light of the current administration's insistence upon internalization of all appointments along the guidelines of political complicity rather than real confidence—an insistence, I might add, that history may record as a bigger spoils system than dreamed of by Andrew Jackson—and the fact that it was reported in today's paper that Richard Nixon has given Elliot Richardson a free hand in an executive investigation of the Watergate, I ask if the American people—and not just myself—can trust the man who has accepted responsibility for the mess to clean it up. That is Nixon. And by the same token can we trust the man who was picked by the man who accepted responsibility for the mess to clean it up, and that is Elliot Richardson? [applause]

A: I think that's a fair question and I think it's well stated. [laughter] Let me respond [applause] by saying that the question cannot be answered by any protestations of Elliot Richardson's impeccable reputation, although most people in government accept that fact. Mr. Richardson is fully aware that the inquiry that you made cannot be answered on that basis. And that is why he has announced that as soon as he is confirmed as attorney general he will [name] an impartial special prosecutor who will meet these criteria that you've outlined as being essential in a fair investigation. [applause and boos]

Q: Mr. John Dean has been greatly instrumental in giving his versions on the current administration. As for instance, the story in *Newsweek* magazine this week. Basically, how much of what Dean says can we believe, and what is your opinion of his conduct?

A: I'm sorry: I cannot speculate about the credibility of any individual involved in this matter of criminal accusations about others. First of all, I don't know Mr. Dean personally. Second, it would be improper for me to, without special knowledge, comment; and third, even if I had that knowledge—which I don't—I think the proper place for any testimony or evidence regarding those matters to be apparent is in the grand jury with the attendant protections of secrecy and formal legal proceedings. [applause]

Q: Mr. Vice President, some people have said that we should consider the Watergate men might have gotten a little carried away in what they did in believing that they thought they were doing this for a very good cause. Would you remind the President the next time you see him that our boys in Canada and our boys in prison should be given that same consideration? [applause]

A: No. [applause and boos] And the same goes for anyone implicated in the Watergate. No. The same reply and the same treatment.