

# Nixon on Watergate: A Shrinking Defense

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WASHINGTON, May 22—In the face of extraordinary pressures, President Nixon has furnished another elaboration of the role of the White House in the Watergate and associated scandals.

The net effect is to shrink the defense perimeter that once surrounded the entire

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White House and the Committee for the Re-election of the President to the Oval Office itself. At the beginning, the President's position—as exemplified in his statement of last Aug. 29—was that “no one in the White House staff, no one in the Administration, presently employed, was involved in this very bizarre incident.”

From that absolute denial, Mr. Nixon pulled back on April 17 to the position that any employe who had been involved in the Watergate scandal would be discharged.

The next step was the President's televised address of April 30, in which he announced the dismissal of John W. Dean 3d as his counsel and the resignations of Richard G. Kleindienst as Attorney General and H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman as key White House aides. While Mr. Nixon said he was reluctant to discuss “personal wrongdoing,” the word was passed by White House offi-

cial that White House involvement would stop at Mr. Dean's level, well below the top.

Throughout these and other statements, the President offered no apologies for his own conduct, no suggestion that he might have erred. On occasion, he seemed inclined to pass the scandal off as a momentary diversion; at a White House dinner party last week, he told a table companion that it would soon be forgotten.

Today, Mr. Nixon not only conceded the probably involvement of his closest advisors in the Watergate cover-up, but he also changed his tone.

On April 30, Mr. Nixon was emotional; today he was matter-of-fact. On April 30, his words went out to the nation over television, with all its capacity of transmit emotion; today, his words were transmitted by an ordinary press release, all low-key and black and white.

There were the following key phrases:

“I can understand how highly motivated individuals could have felt justified in engaging in specific activities that I would have disapproved had they been brought to my attention.”

“It is apparant that I should have given more heed to the warning signals I received along the way about a Watergate cover-up and less to reassurances.”

“To the extent that I may in any way have contributed to the climate in which [illegal

and unethical activities] took place, I did not intend to; to the extent that I failed to prevent them, I should have been more vigilant.”

Thus did Mr. Nixon picture himself as a President who inspired excessive loyalty, as a President who had been deceived by close friends, as a President who has learned a lesson.

## A Heavy Price

But painting it cost him a heavy price.

Mr. Nixon was compelled to admit that he had instructed Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Erlichman to insure that the Watergate investigation did not compromise any covert operations, and to pass that message to the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Mr. Nixon said it was “not my intent, nor my wish, to impede the Watergate inquiry. But, according to a memorandum of a conversation between Mr. Ehrlichman and Lieut. Gen. Vernon A. Walters, then the deputy director of the C.I.A., Mr. Erlichman asked the C.I.A. to head off one part of the FBI. investigation, and said this was “the President's wish.”

To explain the seeming inconsistency, Mr. Nixon said: “Through whatever complex of individual motives and possible misunderstandings, there were apparently wide-ranging efforts to limit the investigation or to conceal the possible involvement of members of the

Administration and the campaign committee.”

By saying this, Mr. Nixon was saying, however reluctantly and indirectly, that Mr. Haldeman or Mr. Ehrlichman or both appear to have been involved in the cover-up. And there was no one who outranked Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Ehrlichman, at the White House, except Mr. Nixon. Either involvement stops with them, or Mr. Nixon himself will be implicated.

## Political Pressure

The President was not eager to make today's statement for that reason, among others. But he felt impelled to do so, according to those in a position to know, not only for the proffered reason—a fear that national security information might be disclosed—but because of great political pressure.

Talk of resignation is in the air. The grumbling on the right from such people as Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona is growing louder. The Ervin committee hearings are dominating the television screens, not Richard Nixon, the man who has used television so well in the past to turn crucial political corners.

Now, for the third time in little more than a month, the President has tried to regain the offensive. He has vowed not to resign, to “continue the job I was elected to do.” Whether he will be able to hold to that vow may depend on whether the new defense perimeter holds, or is pierced by new revelations on Watergate.

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