

Excerpts From White House Briefing on Nixon State

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WASHINGTON, May 23 — Following are excerpts from the transcript of a White House news briefing yesterday by Ronald L. Zeigler, the White House press secretary; Leonard Garment, President Nixon's Counsel, and J. Fred Buzhardt, Special Counsel to the President, on Mr. Nixon's statement on the Watergate affair:

MR. GARMENT. Over all, I would say that there are three questions with respect to the statement that might be usefully addressed in very general fashion by me, preliminary to your questions. First, what is the nature and intent of the statement; secondly, why is it issued at this time; and third, what will happen after the statement is issued and comments are made upon it?

Q. And fourth, why isn't the President making it.

A. We will take the questions when I finish my direct statement, Miss Thomas.

It is a statement by the President, of course, which undertakes to set out the President's relationship to the extent that there was any relationship to the Watergate incident and to the sequence of events following the Watergate break-in. It undertakes in that connection to state what the President knows and what he recalls.

Secondly, the statement undertakes to describe certain essentially unrelated national security transactions during the period from 1969 through 1972 that have be-

come entangled in the comment and testimony relating to the Watergate.

It also undertakes to set these transactions into a proper perspective so that they are not confused one with the other or with the Watergate issue itself.

A Proper Perspective

The second large question that might be raised, and I am sure would be raised, is, why is the statement issued now? The answer is, I think, obvious to most of you in that there has been an increasing number of allegations and charges, a virtual Niagara of charges from public proceedings and leaks from private official investigations conducted in secret, and these charges, many of them hearsay, two or three steps removed from knowledgeable assertions of fact, have in many instances been bantered as fact in news accounts, in newspapers and on television.

Finally, I might add that there are two additional reasons for the issuance of this formal statement by the President at this time, one being the need to prevent the further disclosure of certain sensitive materials. The statement undertakes to describe why certain of the documents that are now before investigating committees were prepared, and the circumstances under which they were prepared, and why the documents deposited by John Dean a couple of weeks back in a safe deposit box are not germane to any of the issues now under discussion, and that further disclo-

sure of the materials contained in the Dean documents would not be in the national interest.

Timing of Statement

Q. Len, why did he [Mr. Nixon] not do this two or three weeks ago?

Mr. Garment. Well, I can only speak from my own standpoint and my own knowledge of what was known and what was not known at that time, and I think what we have had to deal with are limitations on the amount of information available to the President and the staff.

In addition, I would remind you that documents such as the so-called Dean papers were deposited in a safe deposit box, keys tendered to Judge Sirica, and for that period of time neither the White House nor anybody else, to my knowledge, had the faintest idea what documents had been placed in the vault.

Q. This statement is laced with references to covert C.I.A. operations and they are used in mitigation of Presidential actions because he wanted to protect these operations, as I read the statement. Now, can you let those covert operations stand without explaining a little bit more about what they were, and why should the C.I.A. be involved in any case in what are purely domestic concerns?

MR. BUZHARDT. I am afraid I can't help you with giving you covert C.I.A. secret operations. I don't know them. As the President's statement says, although

there was raised the possibility that there might be C.I.A. involvement, it turned out that there was not.

C.I.A. Involvement

Q. At what point did he find out there was no C.I.A. involvement in the Watergate break-in?

MR. BUZHARDT. I don't know the precise date. There was no record made of it.

Q. This statement says on Page 5 that "within a few days, however, I was advised that there was a possibility of C.I.A. involvement in some way." Just who advised the President of this? The statement doesn't say.

MR. BUZHARDT. I don't know the answer.

Q. Well, can't the White House tell us what was going on? Just who advised the President of this?

MR. GARMENT. There are some transactions that can be stated with certainty. There are others that must be stated with a certain degree of generality. The question of who, out of a possible number of persons, whether it be two, or three or four, who might have drawn particular information to his attention, or the totality of circumstances from which that suspicion or knowledge of supposed fact came, is something that really cannot be stated with certainty at this time.

This may be only the first stage in a rather lengthy and complex process of discovery of the facts and the reconstruction of recollections, including joining issue on certain conflicting matters at a later point.

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ment About Handling of the Watergate Investigation

Q. Len, can I follow up? Are you saying in this key point as to who gave the President the information that led to the cover-up, that no one at the White House, the President cannot say who!

MR. GARMENT. I am saying that at this point, at the time of the issuance of this statement, we are not in a position to state the fact of that transaction with any greater particularity than stated in this document.

Q. Ron, despite the President's denial in Paragraph 2 of this short one, doesn't the statement amount to the fact that he acquiesced in an alleged cover-up of Watergate in order to protect the wire-taps, the special intelligence unit —

MR. ZIEGLER. In no way whatever.

Q. Mr. Garment, in the summary which the President has made, points 4 and 5 seem to interrelate and leave the impression with me, at least, that the President, after the Watergate, issued orders that the investigation would be restricted to the incident itself. Now, is that a correct interpretation?

MR. GARMENT. I think that is correct. I think the intent, as suggested rather clearly by these words, was that the President was not concerned about restricting the Watergate, or transactions of this sort, but to avoid getting into another area which was unrelated to Watergate.

Q. But how would —

MR. GARMENT. May I fin-

ish answering your question — that this particular instruction was designed to avoid having the investigation move unwittingly, if you will, into an area covered by some of the legitimate covert operations that the President was aware of and that are discussed earlier in his statements.

Restriction on F.B.I.

Q. Specifically, does this instruction —

Q. I want to follow this up. Did the President ask for a restriction on the F.B.I. investigation in Mexico?

MR. GARMENT. No, there is nothing that I have ascertained—and I think my colleagues will join me—in these weeks of investigations that would suggest that at all.

Q. I want to make sure, on the recollection aspect. The President has just recollected that less than three weeks after the Watergate break-in his F.B.I. director warned him that higher-up White House officials were involved? He just recollected that recently? Is that correct?

Q. One more question. Because it has been bandied about for 11 months now, when there was the so-called Dean report, if there was one, who reported the results to the President? How was it done and was the President satisfied? Did he ask no questions?

MR. GARMENT. Helen, I followed a number of the briefings on this, and I think that they do accurately de-

scribe the situation that took place at that time.

Q. You are not giving me an answer.

MR. GARMENT. I think you have had answers on this subject.

Q. No. Who?

MR. GARMENT. Well, I think you have from Ron.

Q. Tell us again what you know?

MR. GARMENT. I really don't want to cover all that ground.

MR. ZIEGLER. The position is stated for the previous briefings.

Q. It was not stated in previous briefings.

'Tell Us the Facts'

Q. Just tell us the facts as you know them. We don't have that clear.

MR. GARMENT. Miss McClendon, I have not myself undertaken to study the record, and to determine independently what took place with respect to that investigation. I know generally that there was asked, one might say, what was believed to be an investigation or an alleged investigation during that period.

There were constant reports that were made to Ron Ziegler with respect to the results of an investigation for purposes of enabling him to respond to questions on that subject, and as I understand it, those comments referring to an investigation allegedly under way were made to Ron by John Dean.

Q. Why can't you say

whether there was an investigation and who told the President the results?

MR. ZIEGLER. The fact of the matter is—and I will be very brief here, and we are going to conclude—and that is that the President of the United States asked members of his staff—we have referred to senior members of his staff—to find out whether or not anyone in the White House was involved in the matter.

He received repeated assurances that they received from the counsel's office, that no one in the White House was involved in the Watergate matter.

And those assurances were not only provided to senior members of the staff, they were provided to my office, members of my staff, stating clearly that no one in the White House was involved, and that is precisely the information that the President received from a number of individuals.

Q. For example? Will you name them? I mean, did Dean actually talk to the President and tell him no one was involved?

MR. ZIEGLER: Well, we have already stated that the information that came from the counsel's office did not go directly to the President, but was passed to him by senior members of the staff.

Q. Who, for example?

MR. ZIEGLER: Members of the staff who he met with. I think you are well of.