

'Go Easy' on the Watergate Probe



Jack Anderson

ASSISTANT Attorney General Henry Petersen, who has been in charge of the Watergate prosecution for the past 10 months, has been quoted as saying President Nixon personally instructed him to "go easy" on the investigation.

This statement was attributed to Petersen by his brother-in-law, Melvin Clark, in front of my reporter Barbara Browne. Two other witnesses have also sworn they heard Clark repeat the statement on at least two separate occasions.

Petersen vigorously denied that the President had asked him to restrain the Watergate investigation in any way. He told us that his relationship with the President was "straight up and down" and the President "has never asked me to do anything improper."

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BEFORE we delivered our copies of the secret Watergate transcripts to Judge John Sirica, we searched them for signs that the prosecutors might be pulling their punches. We found they had spared no one, with one exception. It seemed to us they were easy on the President. They missed several opportunities to ask witnesses about the President's involvement in the Watergate scandal.

Petersen admitted to us that he advised his prosecutors not to probe into the personal conversations between the Presi-

dent and his lawyer. He also reminded them that the President was not on trial.

He didn't feel his admonition inhibited the prosecutors. This was echoed by one of the prosecutors who told us that Petersen in no way had tried to leash them. For years, we have known Petersen as an honest and honorable law enforcer who would not yield to political pressure. His three Watergate prosecutors also impressed us as men of integrity and ability.

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NEVERTHELESS, we learned last December that the White House hoped to confine the Watergate case to the seven original defendants. We wrote on December 26 that the "Justice Department was discreetly sounding out some of the defendants . . . about entering guilty pleas and settling the affair without trial."

Petersen confirmed our report that White House counsel John Dean had been in close contact with the prosecution during the early investigation. Petersen insisted, however, that Dean had brought no pressure upon the prosecution to settle the case out of court.

From Justice Department sources, we have also learned that President Nixon gave explicit orders not to investigate the government burglary of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist and the use of wiretapping to uncover news leaks. As justification he cited the national security.