

Nixon Got Watergate Facts April 15

By Jack Anderson

The dramatic moments can now be recounted when President Nixon was confronted with the whole truth about Watergate. He was told the stark facts by former Attorney General Richard Kleindienst after White House church services on Sunday, April 15.

At one point, Assistant Attorney General Henry Petersen was hastily summoned to the meeting. He arrived in a dirty T-shirt and sneakers. He had been working on his boat when the call came.

The showdown with the President followed an all-night session at Kleindienst's home where Petersen laid out the grim details. He had just learned from the Watergate prosecutors the extent of the conspiracy. He was so distraught when he found out how high the conspiracy reached that he smashed his fist into a wall.

It was persistent and painstaking legal work by the three original prosecutors, and not a single catalytic incident, that broke open the Watergate case and exposed it as the most explosive political conspiracy in the nation's history.

Belief Confirmed

The prosecutors—Earl Silbert, Seymour Glanzer and Donald Campbell—felt certain that the case involved far

more important personalities than the seven men they prosecuted last January. Their belief was finally confirmed in late March, when they amassed enough details of high-level skulduggery to alarm the White House conspirators.

First John Dean and then Jeb Magruder came to the prosecutors privately with the convoluted tales that are now familiar to millions of television viewers. The prosecutors studied documents provided by the pair and took testimony from other witnesses. By April 14, the three assistant U.S. attorneys had solid proof of a massive conspiracy to obstruct justice reaching right into the White House.

The evidence was so compelling that they felt duty bound to alert the President, since most witnesses claimed he was unaware of the conspiracy. Going through channels, the prosecutors accompanied by their boss, U.S. Attorney Harold Titus, called upon Petersen on the night of April 14.

The meeting had just begun when Petersen asked: "Is it true about Mitchell?" He referred to his friend and former superior, ex-Attorney General John Mitchell.

Petersen's Agony

"Yes," Petersen was told. Such was his agony that he

banged his fist into the office wall.

The prosecutors added that, worse, the case could lead to the impeachment of the President. After the evidence was presented, they agreed that Mr. Nixon should be informed at once.

Petersen put through a call to Kleindienst, who was spending the evening at the White House Correspondents Association's annual dinner. But he was not particularly enjoying himself. Just before he had left home, he had received a call from presidential assistant John Ehrlichman who reported that Magruder was talking to the prosecutors and would implicate a number of Nixon aides.

Kleindienst returned home from the press party after midnight and received the call from Petersen.

"Are you sober?" Petersen asked.

"Fairly," said Kleindienst.

Kleindienst's Despair

He was told it was urgent that they meet immediately. Petersen, Titus and Silbert arrived at 1 a.m. and stayed until 5 a.m. By sunup, the suddenly sobered Kleindienst, a close friend of Mitchell's and a devoted follower of the President, was distressed to the point of despair.

Kleindienst decided the President should be told all

the facts and, after a couple hours of sleep, he put in a call to the White House. It was 9:30 on Sunday morning when he reached Mr. Nixon, who asked him to come to the White House prayer service. Afterward, Kleindienst told the President all that the prosecutors had uncovered. Petersen was summoned to provide more details and arrived in T-shirt and sneakers.

The President obviously had not realized the scope of the conspiracy, Kleindienst told us. He said he had a policy against quoting the President but could report Mr. Nixon had expressed "surprise" and "concern."

"The President went along with every recommendation we made," added Kleindienst. "At no time did he give us any direction other than to investigate the case fully and let the chips fall where they may."

On April 17, two days after the fateful Sunday meeting, President Nixon curiously told the nation that new information had come to him fully three weeks before the Kleindienst meeting on March 23, and he was personally investigating all of the facts about Watergate.

But he did not mention how three Washington prosecutors had spent 10 months to cut through the web of lies spun by top White House aides.