

Reporters Challenge a Spokesman for Nixon

By R. W. APPLE Jr.

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, July 12—For months, the mood in the White House briefing room has been sour and querulous. For months, exchanges between spokesmen and reporters have centered almost exclusively on Watergate.

But this morning, for the first time in the memory of correspondents who have covered the Presidency for two decades, the authority of a spokesman to speak for the President was openly questioned. How did they know, the reporters asked in effect, that this was really what President Nixon felt on this issue?

To many in the room, the breakdown in communication appeared nearly complete.

Gerald L. Warren, the deputy press secretary, who has taken over most of the responsibility for daily briefings from his superior, Ronald L. Ziegler, the press secretary read a statement expressing Mr. Nixon's regret that the Senate Foreign Relations Committee had not recommended confirmation of

G. McMurtrie Godley as Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs.

It was a more or less routine matter, completely unrelated to the Watergate case. But after some questions on other matters, the distrust of the reporters, engendered by White House handling of Watergate, burst forth. There was this exchange:

MR. WARREN: I did not meet with the President this morning.

Q: Gerry, did you meet with Ron Ziegler this morning?

A: Yes, of course. I see Ron every day.

Q: Did most of your information that you gave us come from him?

A: Gentlemen, I have met and talked to a number of the President's senior advisers today.

Q: Gerry, with all due respect to you in this situation, you put us in a awkward position. During the past year, we have had to learn to realize that we have not always had accurate information from the spokesman for

the President. Now we are learning that the spokesman for the President acts as such, without even seeing or talking to the President.

Assertion Challenged

Later, Mr. Warren conceded that while Mr. Ziegler had seen Mr. Nixon every day, it would be "virtually impossible" for him to do so because of the President's "schedule and the things that he is doing."

But then, asked again how the public could have any confidence in White House pronouncements in Mr. Nixon's name when the pronouncer did not even see Mr. Nixon, Mr. Warren insisted that he could and did see the President when necessary.

That assertion was immediately challenged, as follows:

Q: Could we examine that, Gerry? You didn't see him today. You were asked yesterday how long you saw him and you wouldn't say. Today is Thursday. Could you just go backwards and tell us for how long you saw him Wednesday morning, Tuesday morning and Monday morning?

A: Ted, no, I am not going to do that because I don't think that would serve any useful purpose.

Q: We have come up from time to time with questions and have been told they cannot be answered because they are based on hearsay. Now, in effect, what you

gave us today was hearsay. How are you supposed to accept that?

A: Let me just try to end it this way, by saying that the President's spokesman daily gives you the President's view.

A few minutes later, more doubts were expressed. When Mr. Warren said that Richard A. Moore, the special White House counsel who was to testify later in the day on Capitol Hill, had not seen the President this morning, he was immediately asked how he could know that if he himself had not talked to Mr. Nixon.

Worked as Newsmen

Unlike Mr. Ziegler, Mr. Warren has worked as a newsmen, and, until recently, he was considered by most reporters assigned to the White House to be a more reliable—if less well informed—source of information.

According to one White House official he was given the briefing assignment, with Mr. Ziegler in the background, for precisely that reason after Mr. Ziegler's credibility had been challenged as a result of Watergate.

As this morning's questions showed, the reporters now suspect that most of Mr. Warren's information comes from Mr. Ziegler, and that therefore nothing has changed. Almost daily, in a further demonstration of distaste, Mr. Warren is asked whether Mr. Ziegler will be replaced. He always insists Mr. Ziegler will not be.

7-13-73 NYT