

Nixon Denies Role in Cover-up, Admits Abuses by Subordinates

Says Tapes' Release Would Be 'Crippling'

By David S. Broder

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President Nixon last night told the American people that two million words of Senate committee testimony have left unshaken the "simple truth" that he had no advance knowledge of the Watergate break-in and no part in its cover-up.

But he reiterated his refusal to turn over to Senate investigators or the Watergate prosecutors the tape recordings he says would exonerate him, arguing that any such disclosure would "cripple all future Presidents" by exposing their private conversations to public scrutiny.

In a 30-minute radio-television address and an accompanying formal statement, the embattled Chief Executive acknowledged responsibility for "serious abuses" of both political ethics and national security procedures by some of his former White House and campaign aides.

But he said "the time has come to turn Watergate over to the courts," while he and Congress "get on with the urgent business of our nation."

In a direct appeal to the voters who last November gave him a historic election mandate but now tell pollsters they have lost confidence in his conduct in office, Mr. Nixon said:

"I ask for your help to ensure that those who would exploit Watergate in

order to keep us from doing what we were elected to do will not succeed."

Neither in the television talk from his desk in the Oval Office of the White House nor in the largely overlapping formal statement that accompanied it did the President offer significant new details of his role in the Watergate case.

"The facts are complicated," he said, "and the evidence conflicting." It would not be right for me to try to sort out the evidence, to rebut specific witnesses, or to pronounce my own judgments about their credibility. That is for the committee and the courts."

Rather than attempting to rebut "the various charges in detail," Mr. Nixon underscored the contention of his previous major statements—on April 30 and May 22—that "I had no prior knowledge of the Watergate operation [and] I neither took part in nor knew about any of the subsequent cover-up activities."

With the latest Gallup Poll showing that approval of his presidency had dropped to 31 per cent and that almost three-fourths of his constituents believe he knew either of the break-in plans or of the cover-up, Mr. Nixon bore down hard on his own defense.

"In all the millions of words of testimony" to the Senate investigating com-

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United Press International

President Nixon: "I pressed repeatedly to know the facts..."

PRESIDENT, From A1

mittee, he said, "there is not the slightest suggestion that I had any knowledge of the planning for the Watergate break-in."

"As for the cover-up," he added, "my statement has been challenged by only one of the 35 witnesses who appeared—a witness who offered no evidence beyond his own impressions, and whose testimony has been contradicted by every other witness in a position to know the facts."

That witness, of course, was former White House counsel John W. Dean III. And, as he has done in every previous statement, Mr. Nixon contended that it was Dean, more than any other official, who kept assuring him for months that there was no White House involvement in the case.

Where Dean had testified that last Sept. 15, the date on which the seven Watergate defendants were indicted, he had warned the President there was "no assurance" that higher-ups might not be implicated, President said:

"He [Dean] gave me no reason whatever to believe that any others were guilty; I assumed that the indictments of only the seven by the grand jury confirmed the reports he had been giving to that effect throughout the summer."

It was not until six months later, Mr. Nixon said, that he learned the truth of the matter from others, and then, he said, he promptly turned over the information to the Justice Department and "ordered all members of the administration to testify fully before the grand jury."

Mr. Nixon acknowledged that "many have urged that in order to help prove the truth of what I have said, I should turn over to the special prosecutor and the Senate committee recordings of conversations that I held in my office or on my telephone."

Separate lawsuits seeking those tapes have been filed by the Senate select committee investigating Water-

gate and by Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox.

A source close to Dean said after the speech that "if, as the President says, it is time to turn Watergate over to the courts, it means that the time has come to turn over the tapes to the special prosecutor so the courts can determine the question of guilt or innocence by the best evidence available."

But Mr. Nixon told the American people he must withhold the tapes that had been secretly recorded in his office because of "a much more important principle"—the "absolute necessity" of protecting the confidentiality of discussions in the executive office.

"If I were to make public these tapes containing blunt and candid remarks on many different subjects, the confidentiality of the office of the President would always be suspect from now on," he contended.

"It would make no difference whether it was to serve the interests of a court, of a Senate committee or the President himself—the same damage would be done to the principle, and that damage would be irreparable . . . It would cripple all future Presidents by inhibiting conversations between them and those they look to for advice."

In the formal White House statement, Mr. Nixon made an additional legal argument on the tapes, not included in his television address.

Replying to those who have contended that the doctrine of executive privilege extended only to communications with the President on his official duties, Mr. Nixon said:

"The argument is often raised that these tapes are somehow different because the conversations may bear on illegal acts, and because the commission of illegal acts is not an official duty."

"This misses the point entirely," he said. "Even if others, from their own standpoint, may have been thinking about how to cover up an illegal act, from my standpoint I was concerned

with how to uncover the illegal acts.

"It is my responsibility under the Constitution to see that the laws are faithfully executed, and in pursuing the facts about Watergate I was doing precisely that. Therefore, the precedent would . . . be one that would risk exposing private presidential conversations involving the whole range of official duties."

The television speech largely avoided such legalistic arguments in favor of dealing with the political crisis posed by the Watergate disclosures, a crisis which has jeopardized Mr. Nixon's grip on the office he won by such a commanding majority only nine months ago.

The Chief Executive reportedly worked through 11 drafts of the speech at his Camp David retreat, applying the finishing touches after his return to the White House yesterday afternoon.

In the effort to stem erosion of public support that has halved his popularity rating in the past seven months and reduced his support to the lowest level recorded for any President in more than 20 years, Mr. Nixon made these arguments:

• The "serious abuses" of campaign norms and the "excessive partisanship" represented by such things as the compilation of the White House "enemy list . . . do not represent what I believe government should be or what I believe politics should be . . . I deplore them."

He pledged he would be "more vigilant" against such practices in the future and that he would do "all I can to ensure . . . a new level of political decency and integrity in America."

• As for the extraordinary measures taken by the White House "plumbers" unit to protect national security, including the break-in at Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office, Mr. Nixon acknowledged that "instances have now come to light in which a zeal for security did go too far and

did interfere impermissibly with individual liberty."

"It is essential," he said, "that such mistakes not be repeated. But it is also essential that we do not overreact . . . by tying the President's hands in a way that would risk sacrificing our security . . ."

• What underlies the Watergate "abuses" was an attitude that first took root in the 1960s, that "the right to take the law into their own hands" could be asserted by people who believed "their purposes represented a higher morality."

The notion that "the end justifies the means," Mr. Nixon said, spread from zealots of the left who were "praised in the press and even from some pulpits," to zealots of the right who opposed them.

"We must recognize that one excess begets another, and that the extremes of violence and discord in the 1960s contributed to the extremes of Watergate," he said. "Both are wrong . . . No individual, no group and no political party has a corner on the market on morality."

• Finally, Mr. Nixon contended that the "backward-looking obsession with Watergate is causing the nation to neglect matters of far greater importance to all of the American people."

Aware of numerous polls that show a growing public impatience with the protracted Senate hearings, the President contended that "we must not stay so mired in Watergate" that Congress fails to handle "legislation vital to your health and well-being," or postpones decisions on the economy and national security.

Without saying so specifically, Mr. Nixon hinted that it was time the Watergate hearings closed down, saying, "The time has come to turn Watergate over to the courts, where the questions of guilt or innocence belong."

If Congress does not "get on with the jobs that need to be done," he said, "every one of you ought to be demanding to know why."

Mr. Nixon closed his speech with a modest ap-

peal for "your support in getting on once again with meeting your problems."

From beginning to end, the President's performance was in a lower emotional pitch than his last major television discussion of Watergate on April 30.

In that address, delivered on the night he had accepted the resignations of four of his top administration aides, Mr. Nixon appeared shaken and, at moments, almost plaintive.

Last night, seated at a desk in his office, his gestures were small, his rhetoric deliberately low-keyed, his manner tightly controlled.

First reactions to the speech generally followed partisan lines, with most Republicans echoing party chairman George Bush and California Gov. Ronald Reagan in saying the President had put the situation in "better perspective."

Democrats said they were "disappointed" at the President's failure to provide rebuttal to specific allegations, but several of them said the speech might be more politically effective than his earlier utterances.

The 4½-page statement accompanying the President's speech essentially repeated much of the same material. While it spelled out some details Mr. Nixon omitted from the broadcast, the statement was considerably less specific than an earlier White House account of the crucial sequence of the President's meetings with Dean.

That account was given to the Senate Watergate committee orally in late June by J. Fred Buzhardt, the White House special counsel. Copies of the notes from the Buzhardt account were published on June 21.

Last night's presidential statement conformed to the Buzhardt account, even in one particular where the President conceded he had previously been in error.

In his May 22 statement, Mr. Nixon had said he learned of the burglary of Ellsberg's psychiatrist on March 21. Last night, he cor-

rected the date to March 17, conforming to the Buzhardt notes which say that on March 17 "Dean told the President of the Ellsberg break-in, but [said] that it had nothing to do with Watergate."

On many of the crucial questions that occupied the Watergate committee, Mr. Nixon said absolutely nothing.

His speech and the statement said nothing about the use of funds to finance the "intelligence" operations or to pay legal expenses of the Watergate defendants; it said nothing about the warnings former acting FBI Director L. Patrick Gray and Assistant Attorney General Henry E. Petersen said they gave the President about the actions of his White House assistants; it said nothing, favorable or unfavorable, about such resigned top aides as John D. Ehrlichman and H. R. (Bob) Halde- man, who have been accused of complicity in the cover-up.

Mr. Nixon offered no explanation of why he let Halde- man listen to some of the tapes, even after Halde- man had left the White House.

Mr. Nixon said in his statement that he deliberately was not attempting to answer "many of the questions and contentions raised during the Watergate hearings."

"With the Senate hearings and the grand jury investigation still proceeding," he said, "with much of the testimony in conflict, it would be neither possible nor appropriate to attempt a definitive account of all that took place."

Many of those questions will undoubtedly be pressed when Mr. Nixon holds the news conference he has promised reporters during his sojourn at San Clemente later this month. It will be Mr. Nixon's first meeting with the press since last March 15.

But Mr. Nixon may have been putting the reporters on notice of his unwillingness to respond to detailed questions when he said in his statement that he would not "enter upon an endless course of explaining and re-

butting a complex of point-by-point claims and charges arising out of that conflicting testimony which may engage committees and courts for months or years to come."

"While the judicial and

legislative branches resolve these matters," he said, "I will continue to discharge to the best of my ability my constitutional responsibilities as President of the United States."