

# A President Under Fire

By Lawrence Stern  
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The voice quavered at times and the tension blazed in his face throughout.

But the President kept his Watergate defense perimeters intact during the 50-minute performance at San Clemente yesterday that can be called nothing less than a full-scale confrontation.

Ordinarily the announcement of William P. Rogers' replacement by Henry Kissinger as secretary of state would have been golden grist for the Washington news mills, worthy enough a subject to dominate a presidential press conference.

This was no ordinary time, however, and the pent-up tide of Watergate questions came bursting through the sluices as soon as President Nixon finished his prepared announcement. The Kissinger appointment might just as well have been a local postmastership for all the attention it was accorded.

It provoked not a single question.

## DELUGE

Instead the President was faced again by the Watergate demon, which has become a far greater affliction since he last met the press several months ago. He was being bombarded, he said, "12 to 15 minutes a night on each of the three major networks" with Watergate.

And so he summoned up yesterday all the old craft and artifices that had been forged in his earlier crises to do battle with the clamoring journalists.

There are large numbers of Americans who would prefer that he resign—who didn't accept the mandate of 1972, the President said with a show of sorrowful tolerance. "After all," he acknowledged, "I know that most of the members of the press corps were not enthusiastic."

## LINE

He sought to draw a dividing line between the sordid disclosures of the Watergate scandal, which he deplures,

and "the business of the people," which he wants to get on with.

But some politicians, some members of the press and television are deflecting him from doing his job by exploiting Watergate. They are people, he said, who didn't accept his 1972 mandate, who don't want a stronger America, who don't want the burdensome federal bureaucracy trimmed back, who don't want more power returned to the people.

"I impute no improper motives to them," the President conceded. "I think they would prefer that I fail. On the other hand, I'm not going to fail."

## CONTROL

At the outset, in laying out his case, the President was visibly uneasy, his face puffing, his words stammered.



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The President had moments to smile.

But he seemed to gain confidence and take command as it went along. The

turning point seemed to be the burst of laughter he got when he referred to his now-famous shoving of press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler in New Orleans on Monday, an incident that immediately gave rise to speculation about Mr. Nixon's emotional state.

If his old law partner and confidante, John Mitchell, had told him the truth about Watergate, the President quipped, "I would have blown my stack, just as I did at Ziegler the other day."

Mr. Nixon was clearly trying to play down the Ziegler incident as an aberrational outburst on his part.

Throughout the performance the President stuck to his earlier defense line: His trusted aides had not let him in on the truth until too late. As soon as he found out, he acted.

Yet at one point, when he was asked how much personal blame he accepts for the climate at the White House that brought on the

Watergate scandal, Mr. Nixon answered with anger: "I accept it all."

It was, by any standard, an extraordinary meeting between press and President.

At one point he engaged Dan Rather of CBS in a sarcastic contretemps. Rather said he was posing a question "with due respect for your office. . ."

The President interrupted: "That would be unusual." There was laughter but also a grim undertone to the exchange. The CBS commentator is regarded within the White House family as unfriendly.

It was apparent that Mr. Nixon's view of his relationship with the press remains unaltered from his gloomy and premature farewell appearance in the 1962 California gubernatorial campaign.

"Frankly, if I had always followed what the press predicted or what the polls predicted, I would never have been elected President," he said.



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**The President gestured to illustrate one answer at the press conference**