

PRESIDENT VOWS TO REMAIN IN OFFICE

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Hew Admits Damage
But Calls Watergate
A Thing of the Past

By Lou Cannon

Washington Post Staff Writer

Washington, Aug. 22—President Nixon today declared that the scandalous conduct of Watergate is "water under the bridge." Mr. Nixon admitted that his administration had been damaged by Watergate, but he vowed to remain in office despite the opposition of political and media opponents. He said "it is a thing of the past."

"I have 3 1/2 years to go, and I am going to use every day of those 3 1/2 years trying to get the people of the United States to recognize that whatever mistakes we have made, that in the long run this administration by making this world safe for our children, has deserved high marks rather than low marks," Mr. Nixon said. "No matter whether I succeed or not, we will judge that."

The President's 321 press conference, his first since March 15, was held outdoors under sunny, smog-free skies in a parking area adjacent to the West Wing White House. Mr. Nixon appeared nervous at the outset, and his voice quavered frequently. But he also seemed firm in control throughout the press conference, and he occasionally bantered with reporters or joked about the form of their questions.

It was the first time that Mr. Nixon had submitted to public questioning since he conceded five months ago that high White House aides were implicated in the Watergate case. Accordingly, 18 of the 21 questions in the fast 50-minute news conference were directed to Watergate-related issues.

In highlights of his Watergate defense, Mr. Nixon predicted that his two former top aides, H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman, would be exonerated of criminal charges, and he repeated his April 30 description of them as "two of the finest public servants he ever knew." He said that Haldeman and Ehrlichman had been unfairly "tried in the press, and tried in television."

Mr. Nixon made a similar defense of Vice President Spiro T. Agnew, who is under investigation in a case involving kickbacks and Maryland contractors. The President declared that "my confidence in his integrity has not been shaken," and he denounced the "outrageous leak of information from either the grand jury or the prosecution to the Department of Justice by all three."

Mr. Nixon also defended his long-promised news conference on the resignation of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and his replacement by Ronald Reagan's former ambassador to the United States, Alexander Haig.

PRESIDENT, From A1

had expressed the opinion before the news conference that this announcement would prompt foreign policy questions, but the reporters plunged immediately into Watergate questions following Mr. Nixon's six-minute statement. They stayed with Watergate for the rest of the time except for two questions about Agnew and a concluding question about Cambodia.

One of the many unresolved questions from the 37 days of Senate Watergate hearings is why President Nixon turned over to Haldeman tapes of his private conversations with then-White House counsel John W. Dean

III after Assistant Attorney General Henry Petersen had warned the President that Haldeman faced indictment.

Mr. Nixon answered by saying that he had given Haldeman only one tape after the warning, a recording of a conversation in the Oval Office on Sept. 15, 1972, in which Dean said he first warned the President that White House officials might be involved in the Watergate case. However, the President said that Haldeman listened "only to the tape on Sept. 15 . . . in which he had participated in the conversation throughout."

Haldeman has testified that Dean was with the President alone both before and after Haldeman was in the

meeting and that he heard the entire tape.

Another question concerned the President's apparent failure to respond to the warning of then acting FBI Director L. Patrick Gray on July 6, 1972, that aides were trying to confuse the Watergate investigation and would "mortally wound" the presidency if they succeeded.

Mr. Nixon said he didn't know whether Gray had used the words "mortally wounded" and that in any case, "That is irrelevant."

The President also was asked why he had not been warned of the White House involvement in Watergate by his old friend and then Attorney General John N. Mitchell—and why he had not asked Mitchell to give him his opinion.

Mr. Nixon said he had talked to Mitchell by telephone immediately after the Watergate break-in in June, 1972. The President said that Mitchell, then the chairman of the Committee for the Re-election of the President, had "expressed great chagrin that he had not run a tight enough ship, and that some of the boys, as he called them, got involved in this kind of activity, which he knew to be very, very embarrassing, apart from its illegality, to the campaign."

"Throughout I would have expected Mr. Mitchell to tell me in the event that he was involved or that anybody else was," Mr. Nixon said. "He didn't tell me. I don't blame him for not telling me. He has given his reasons for not telling me. I regret that he did not, because he is exactly right. Had he told me, I would have blown my stack, just as I did at Ziegler the other day."

The President's comment about press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler drew laughter from the reporters and from Ziegler, who was shoved toward reporters by an angry Mr. Nixon outside a New Orleans convention center Monday.

Mr. Nixon's outburst against Ziegler was provoked by the sight of reporters entering the same door of the center which the President was using. It was regarded both by aides and reporters as symbolic of the President's growing tension with the press, an attitude that was carefully expressed by Mr. Nixon at various points in the news conference.

His anger showed, however, when he was asked whether he hadn't violated

his oath of office in 1970 by approving a surveillance plan that specifically authorized burglary in domestic security cases. The plan was rescinded five days after it was put into operation because of objections from FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover.

Mr. Nixon said that a Supreme Court decision of last year "indicates inherent power in the presidency to protect the national security in cases like this." Looking directly at his questioner, Mr. Nixon then said:

"I should also point out to you that in the three Kennedy years and the three Johnson years through 1966, when burglarizing of this type did take place, when it was authorized on a very large scale, there was no talk of impeachment and it was quite well known.

"I shall also point out that when you ladies and gentlemen indicate your great interest in wiretaps, and I understand that, that the height of the wiretaps was when Robert Kennedy was

Attorney General in 1963. I don't criticize it, however. He had over 250 in 1963, and of course the average in the Eisenhower administration and the Nixon administration is about 110. But if he had 10 more and as a result of wiretaps had been able to discover the Oswald plan, it would have been worth it."

The shortest answer in Mr. Nixon's press conference came when he was asked how much responsibility he accepted for the "climate at the White House" and the "abuses of Watergate."

"I accept it all," he replied curtly.

But the President, in response to three other questions, showed both wearying effects of Watergate and a resentment against those who would "exploit" the issue.

Asked whether his capacity to govern had been seriously weakened, Mr. Nixon said, "It is true that as far as the capacity to govern is concerned that to be under a constant barrage 12 to 15 minutes a night on each of the three major networks for four months tends to raise some questions with regard to the capacity to govern.

"But I also know this," Mr. Nixon added. "I was elected to do a job. Watergate is an episode that I deeply deplore, and had I been running the campaign rather than trying to run the country and particularly the foreign policy of this coun-

try at this time, it would never have happened. But that is water under the bridge, it is gone now."

Mr. Nixon then said, "we are proceeding as best we know to get all those guilty brought to justice in Watergate, but now we must move from Watergate to the business of the people." Several reporters rose and tried to ask questions, but Mr. Nixon said "just a minute" and continued with his answer.

"We have had 30 minutes of this press conference," the President continued. "I have yet to have, for example, one question on the business of the people, which shows you how we are consumed with this."

After the press conference, Mr. Nixon met with his chief of staff, Alexander M. Haig Jr., and expressed surprise that no one had questioned him about the Rogers resignation. But Haig said Mr. Nixon was pleased with his showing.

"He did his utmost with gloves-off and even worse questions," Haig said. "He did a superb job and this will contribute to getting on with the business at hand."

At one point in the press conference Mr. Nixon was asked to identify those whom he had described in his television speech last week as people who would "exploit" the Watergate issue.

"I would suggest that where the shoe fits, people should wear it," Mr. Nixon said. "I would think that some political figures, some members of the press perhaps, some members of the television, perhaps would exploit it."

On other Watergate-related questions, the President denied that he was giving the impression of "at least a subtle attempt to bribe the judge" when he met with Judge W. Matt Byrne to discuss appointing him FBI director while Byrne was presiding over the trial of Daniel Ellsberg.

Mr. Nixon said he had met with Byrne because then-Attorney General Richard Kleindienst had recommended Byrne for the FBI job and because Mr. Nixon wanted someone "preferably with FBI experience, preferably with prosecutor's experience, and preferably, if possible, a Democrat so that we would have no problem with con-

firmation."

On the subject of clemency for the convicted Watergate burglars Mr. Nixon said that Haldeman testified accurately that a discussion in the President's office on March 21 was about a fund for the families of the defendants rather than "hush money" to keep the defendants from talking.

Mr. Nixon said he told Dean at this meeting that the defendants would not stay quiet unless they received clemency. The President also said there would be a problem in getting the money to them and that Dean had told him it would probably take \$1 million during the four years that the defendants were in jail.

And so that was why I concluded, as Mr. Haldeman recalls perhaps . . . 'John, it is wrong, it won't work. We can't give clemency and we have got to get this story out. And therefore, I direct you, and I direct Haldeman, I direct Ehrlichman and I direct Mitchell to get together tomorrow and meet with me as to how we get this story out.' And that is how the meeting on the 22d took place."