

White House 'Maneuvering' on Tapes

How Decision Was Made

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Washington Post

Washington

The past week's White House maneuvering on the Watergate tapes issue was designed primarily to create a showdown in which President Nixon could fire Special Watergate Prosecutor Archibald Cox and abolish his office, according to several high Administration sources.

As long ago as June, just a month after Cox was appointed, the sources said, the President had determined that the existence of a special prosecutor was

"unworkable" and some be with us for three and one-half years (the rest of Mr. Nixon's term), creating a tremendous governing way would have to be found to abolish his office.

"He (Cox) wasn't containable," one high Administration source said. Cox was "expanding so that he would be with us for three and one-half years (the rest of Mr. Nixon's term), creating a tremendous governing problem, dividing the Executive Branch against itself," the source said.

Sources close to former Attorney-General Elliot L. Richardson said that Cox was fired Saturday because his investigation was hitting too close to the President and his friends and former aides and was probing too deeply into every aspect of White House activity going back to 1969.

TAPES

While conceding that the tapes controversy was handled in a way that made it possible to get rid of Cox,

White House sources disagree about Cox's investigation reaching too close to the President himself.

They say the primary objection to the special prosecutor's operation was that in the White House view it had become partisan and something of a witchhunt.

Accordingly, the sources said, President Nixon decided last Monday to make a nationwide television address in which he would announce the abolition of Cox' office, give his own version of the contents of the White House tapes and declare the controversy to be closed.

Mr. Nixon, at that point, had ruled out any future access to the tapes by the courts or grand jury and was unwilling to allow independent verification by an outside party of the accuracy of his version of what the tapes contained.

The Justice Department then entered into negotiations with the White House, and Attorney General Richardson tried to persuade the President not to fire Cox, according to the sources.

In the course of negotiations the proposal that Senator John C. Stennis (Dem-Miss.) authenticate the President's version of the tapes was seized on by the White House.

VERSION

When the Senate Watergate committee leadership agreed to accept the authenticated version of the tapes on Friday, the sources said, the President saw the opportunity to get rid of Cox.

The President knew that Cox would not accept the so-called compromise," one source said yesterday, "and Cox' refusal would be an act of defiance, making his firing not only reasonable but necessary, particularly in the face of the acceptance by the (Senate) committee."

Another source said: "The President wanted to see if a constitutional bargain could be struck with Cox. The answer was that it couldn't."

It is known that former top presidential aides H. R. Haldeman, John D. Ehrlichman and Charles W. Colson have complained bitterly about the treatment they had received from the special prosecutor's office.

Whether these complaints reached the President's ears is not known.

One source said that the three maintained that they had been treated like "members of the Mafia" by attorneys from Cox' office. For example, Haldeman, the President's former chief of staff, was called to Washington last week to testify before two of the special prosecutor's grand juries. He testified Wednesday, Thursday and Friday and was scheduled to reappear tomorrow, thus forcing him to spend the long weekend in Wash-

ington. Several sources made it clear yesterday that the nine White House tapes subpoenaed by Cox in his investigation of the Watergate coverup were not in fact the central issue of last week's tug-of-war between Cox and the White House.

SOURCES

Sources close to Richardson and Cox said they were more concerned about getting other memos, notes and documents, which also were subpoenaed from the White House.

Various documents and memos from the White House could have been crucial evidence in cases expected to be brought by Cox against Nixon campaign contributors, the International Telegraph and Telephone Co., White House wiretapping, and secret investigations into news leaks the sources said.

On Friday, the President directed Cox "to make no further attempts by judicial process to obtain tapes, notes or memoranda of presidential conversations."

This is the order that Cox refused to obey, leading to his removal from office on Saturday.



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