

Nixon Claims Privilege On Milk Price Meeting

Washington

The White House has claimed executive privilege to block former Agriculture Secretary Clifford Hardin from testifying about a 1971 meeting with President Nixon and other top White House aides on a controversial increase in milk price supports.

Hardin has told Senate Watergate committee investigators, however, that the White House Office of Management and Budget dropped its opposition to higher price supports shortly after the March 23, 1971, meeting.

Hardin, now vice chairman of the Ralston-Purina Co. in St. Louis, said he believes he had "some contact" with George Shultz, then OMB director and now secretary of the treasury, following the session and that "Shultz removed his opposition to the increase."

The step left Hardin free to order the higher price supports, which he did on March 25, 1971. He told the Washington Post yesterday that he had no idea of the reasons for the turnaround by Shultz.



EX-SECRETARY HARDIN
His testimony blocked

Shultz, who also attended the private meeting with Mr. Nixon, declined through a spokesman to comment.

The March 23 session evidently was held immediately after the president heard from more than a dozen representatives of three big dairy co-ops from whom the White House was expecting \$2 million in campaign contributions for Mr. Nixon's re-election effort.

White House lawyers indicated that executive privilege was claimed for oral testimony about the meeting in the oval office largely in hopes of heading off forced production of a tape recording of the session. (The President's publicly announced meeting with the dairy industry spokesman was held in the cabinet room and apparently was not tape-recorded.)

In its October 12 ruling ordering surrender of Mr. Nixon's secret Watergate tapes, the U.S. court of appeals here held that the President's claim of confidentiality had been effectively waived by the public testimony of former White House aides about those conversations.

The current Agriculture secretary, Earl L. Butz, said yesterday his department is helping the Justice Department investigate the milk contributions case.

Butz, however, insisted that the Office of Inspector General in the Agriculture Department was not engaged directly in investigating the milk-fund matter.

"My Inspector General's office doesn't get into political contributions," Butz told reporters. "If there's a prima facie case, it goes over to Justice."

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