

Jaworski Defends Sirica As Fair-Minded Judge

Washington

Special prosecutor Leon Jaworski came to the defense of U.S. District Judge John J. Sirica yesterday in a challenge of his ability to give the Watergate coverup defendants a fair trial.

The challenge came from John Mitchell, John Ehrlichman, Charles Colson and Gordon Strachan, all former administration officials and Kenneth W. Parkinson, a lawyer for the Nixon reelection committee in the 1972 campaign.

They had claimed that Sirica, who gained nationwide attention for his handling of the Watergate break-in trial, the White House tapes controversies and other Watergate-related events, had a "substantial personal interest" and a prosecutorial bias in the outcome of the trial scheduled for September 9.

Jaworski, however, said that as the trial judge he can and will "fully protect" the defendants' rights to a fair trial. The prosecutor

added that the attempt to have Sirica disqualify himself or be disqualified was based on "unfounded conclusions."

But the prosecutor said that while Sirica "does not have a disqualifying interest in the outcome of the case" it might be reasonable to turn the matter over to a committee of judges as asked by lawyers of five of the seven defendants.

Not joining in the attempt to remove Sirica from the trial were former White House chief of staff H. R. Haldeman and reelection committee official Robert Mardian. Their lawyers have represented Sirica on non-Watergate matters in the U.S. Court of Appeals.

Sirica has not said what

course he will take in the actions directed against him. The motions asked that he hold an evidentiary hearing. He could do that, rule one way or the other without a hearing, turn the matter over to the court's three-judge calendar committee, or give it to the chief judge.

Sirica assigned the coverup case to himself while he was still chief judge, a post he relinquished March 19 when he turned 70 years of age.

To an allegation that Sirica has a "personal stake in the outcome of this case" because it would vindicate

his earlier actions, Jaworski replied that "it is entirely proper to reject as unfounded the defendants' scurrilous accusations." It said the veteran judge has an interest in convictions in the case "only if the evidence fairly establishes guilt."

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