

How the White

Washington,

The White House declared yesterday that President Nixon never was criminally liable in the Watergate cover-up attempt despite damaging statements he made in conversations with key figures in the scandal.

The White House made the declaration of Mr. Nixon's innocence in a 50-page legal argument accompanying the hundreds of pages of edited transcripts made public yesterday and sent to the House Judiciary Committee.

"In all of the thousands of words spoken, even through they are unclear and ambiguous, not once does it appear that the President of the United States was engaged in a criminal plot to obstruct justice," James D.

St. Clair, the President's special counsel, concluded in the brief.

The legal brief, which included selected statements by the President, was released yesterday morning. Several hours later, after the White House view had been widely disseminated, the transcripts were made public, as President Nixon had promised Monday night in his nationally televised address.

Mr. Nixon's assistants were clearly apprehensive about how the transcripts would be interpreted. Ronald L. Ziegler, Mr. Nixon's press secretary, who usually reflects the President's thoughts, said he hopes the public will consider the full volume of tran-

scripts and not concentrate on the meeting of March 21, 1973, in which the President and his aides discussed options for quieting the White House role in the Watergate burglary of June 17, 1972.

The transcripts cover conversations between Sept. 15, 1972, and April 27, 1973.

Within the White House, release of the transcripts was viewed as "an act of courage" by the President, and the strategy, both in the legal brief and in conversations, was to depict John W. Dean III, the President's former counsel, as the villain in the case.

When the contents of the transcripts became known, new questions were raised as to why the President made public the documents.

White House officials said



JAMES D. ST. CLAIR
The President's lawyer

that, in addition to the reasons given by the President in a television address Monday night, it was believed

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that the transcripts would have leaked out, bit by bit, and depicted Mr. Nixon in the worst possible light.

This way the President was able to control the editing of the transcripts, omitting obscenities and the names of innocent persons accused in private conversations, and to put the President's own interpretation on what the conversations meant. His action was also designed to keep the tape recording themselves in the secrecy of the White House files.

Despite the material damaging to Mr. Nixon, official sources said, the legal brief was designed to show that the transcripts, if read in their entirety, would raise considerable doubt about any possible criminal in-

volvement in the coverup. Criminal involvement, his lawyers have said, is needed to constitute an impeachable offense.

"Throughout the period of the Watergate affair," St. Clair wrote, "the raw material of these recorded confidential conversations establishes that the President had no prior knowledge of the break-in and that he had no knowledge of any coverup prior to March 21, 1973."

The legal brief attempts to put an interpretation on the President's words that would not be otherwise apparent.

For example, on Sept. 15, 1972, less than two months before the presidential election, Mr. Nixon congratulated Dean for doing a good

job in the Watergate matter.

"By the way you have handled all this," Mr. Nixon told Dean, "all this seems to me has been very skillful putting your fingers in the leaks that have sprung here and sprung there."

The White House interpretation of the President's remark is: "This was said in context not of a criminal plot to obstruct justice as Dean alleged but rather in the context of the politics of the matter, such as civil suits, countersuits, Democratic efforts to exploit Watergate as a political issue and the like. The reference to 'putting your finger in the leak' was clearly related to the handling of the political and public relations aspects of the matter."

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