

## Motive Sought

# Probers Explore The Cox Firing

Washington

The House Judiciary Committee, exploring President Nixon's possible motive in ordering the dismissal of former special Watergate prosecutor Archibald Cox, focused yesterday on when the President first learned of the extent of the alleged Watergate coverup.

Some committee members said privately that they had heard evidence suggesting that Mr. Nixon may have sought to prevent the involvement of the White House in the scandal on March 17, 1973, four days before the President has said he first learned of the scope of the coverup attempt.

In addition, well-placed sources reported that former White House special counsel Charles W. Colson had told impeachment inquiry lawyers he warned the President on Feb. 14, 1973, that his administration might "topple" if former Attorney General John N. Mitchell did not assume responsibility for the Watergate matter.

The Judiciary Committee, beginning the sixth — and, its members hope, the final — week of closed hearings on evidence assembled by the inquiry staff, considered the issue of Mr. Nixon's knowledge of the coverup attempt as a prelude to an examination of the dismissal of Cox last October 20.

Two Democrats on the committee, Representatives John Conyers Jr. of Michigan and Robert F. Drinan of Massachusetts, told reporters that evidence had been presented to indicate that the White House tried to order Cox to curtail some aspects of his investigation.

Conyers said Cox had been given "literally direct or-

Nixon had referred in the June 4 discussion to a Watergate-related conversation with Dean on March 17, 1973.

The sources said the June 4 tape confirmed the substance of a confidential committee staff memorandum, which was obtained last week by the New York Times. According to the memo, Dean warned Mr. Nixon on March 17 that officials of the President's 1972 re-election campaign were on the verge of implicating H. R. Haldeman, then the White House chief of staff, in the coverup attempt.

Mr. Nixon allegedly replied, "We've got to cut that off. We can't have that go to Haldeman."

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ders not to do certain things." Drinan, who is a Jesuit priest, said some of the orders had come from Alexander M. Haig Jr., the White House chief of staff.

Cox was dismissed for refusing to follow the President's instructions to abandon the pursuit, through federal court subpoenas, of Watergate tape recordings.

The dismissal, along with the resignation of Elliot L. Richardson as attorney general and the discharge of his deputy, William D. Ruckelshaus, touched off a national furor last fall and prompted the House to begin the impeachment inquiry.

Committee members began examining the episode — later dubbed the "Saturday night massacre" — by listening to segments totaling 48 minutes from a six-hour taped conversation on June 4, 1973.

In the conversation, the President reportedly described to various aides, including Haig and Ronald L. Ziegler, the White House press secretary, what Mr. Nixon had heard in listening to recordings of conversations with John W. Dean II.

Most committee members refused comment.

But two members, a Republican and a Democrat, disclosed privately that Mr.