

Letter reveals Ford tried to head off Watergate probe

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The Los Angeles Times

WASHINGTON — President Ford, while House minority leader, sought to rally Republicans against an early Watergate investigation on grounds it was "irresponsible" and "motivated by political considerations," according to a Ford letter obtained this week by The Los Angeles Times.

The 1972 letter, which was distributed to GOP members

of the House Banking Committee referred to "political overtones" of the panel's proposed inquiry into Watergate finances.

The letter also said the constitutional rights of the men indicted on charges of committing the Watergate burglary should be protected.

The letter did not mention any White House contacts with Ford, which is consistent with Ford's previous testimony. Such contacts have been alleged by former White House counsel John W. Dean III.

The letter does show that Ford strongly urged Republican members to attend a crucial banking committee meeting, the same strategy discussed by then President Richard M. Nixon and his aides about two weeks earlier.

Ford's letter, drafted by Graham Northrup, a Republican aide on the committee, said it was "imperative" and of "utmost importance" that GOP members attend an

Election



Oct. 3, 1972, meeting at which subpoena power would be proposed by the committee chairman, the late Rep. Wright Patman, D-Tex.

The tape of a Sept. 15, 1972, White House meeting about two weeks before the Ford letter showed Dean told Nixon that Ford and Richard Cook, a White House lobbyist, were "gonna march them (the Republican members) into that committee room like cattle, all together."

"Nobody's gonna be off playing golf that day," Dean added on the tape.

The result was that all 14 Republicans attending the meeting joined six Democrats to defeat the subpoena move

by a 20-15 vote.

Meanwhile, former Presidential aide John D. Ehrlichman said this week he never contacted Ford about the proposed Patman investigation despite contrary indications in the Sept. 15, 1972, tape.

Ehrlichman, in a telephone interview from New York, agreed that the "bottom line" of the Sept. 15 White House meeting which he did not attend was that he was to contact Ford.

"That's right," Ehrlichman told The Times. "The problem is that nobody bothered to tell me that. Nobody ever brought it to me."

He added, "I have no knowledge that Ford was ever contacted."

Ehrlichman said it would not have been unusual for White House lobbyists at that time, such as Cook or William E. Timmons, to have contacted Ford about the Patman inquiry. But he stressed that "I have no information" that this happened.

Patman's committee meeting occurred one month before the 1972 presidential election and two weeks after the first Watergate burglary indictments. The meeting was called to vote on a Patman proposal that 23 witnesses be subpoenaed, including White House aides and Nixon campaign officials.

Some of these witnesses were subsequently convicted of conspiracy in the Watergate cover-up.

Ford, in his letter, told Republican committee members: "This is a matter of utmost importance, and I urge you to be present at the meeting."

His letter continued: "Obviously, we desire to see those who have been involved in illegal activities brought to justice, but at the

same time we must be careful not to impinge on the constitutional rights of those who have been indicted by reckless and irresponsible investigations motivated by political considerations.

"Because of the political overtones of this matter, I think it would be imperative for all Republican members to be present at the committee meeting to assure that the investigative resolution is appropriately drawn."

This last phrase apparently referred to Republican proposals to remove subpoena power from any committee resolution or to postpone any inquiry until after the Presidential election.

Northrup, the committee aide who drafted the letter at Ford's request, said Ford signed it and sent it to GOP members in late September 1972.

White House Press Secretary Ron Nessen, after reviewing the text of the letter, said this week: "It certainly doesn't conflict with what he (Ford) said at the time. Whether the letter was public at the time or not, there's nothing new in it."

In a related development, Dean, in an interview this week with The Washington Star, said he did not think "there's any chance that Ford was wittingly involved in a conspiracy to cover up Watergate."

"I think that certainly he wasn't privy to the kind of knowledge as to the degree of problems inside the White House," Dean said.

Asked whether then Minority Leader Ford was "unwittingly" involved in a Watergate cover-up, Dean replied: "No. I couldn't define the Watergate cover-up to include Gerald Ford's actions. What Ford did was to help block an investigation that was very troublesome to the White House. Now that was what a minority leader was for, to help the White House. He didn't know the degree of the problems in the White House. This was just an embarrassment before the election."

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