

Jack Anderson

Recognizing the 'Good Guys' of Watergate

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The White House transcripts portray Richard Nixon as a petty, cynical man who has hidden behind the majesty of the presidency. He operated through other men whoaped him and tended, in the way of young men, to out-Nixon Nixon.

But there were other men who show up in the transcripts as principled and courageous. They should not be lost in the wave of revulsion over the poison-ous atmosphere inside the Oval Office.

White House lawyer Len Garment, for instance, tried to persuade the President to do the right thing. H. R. Haldeman reported to the President on April 16, 1973, that Garment "now says it is imperative that he meet with you... and what he will say to you is that it is clear to him that you are in possession of knowledge that you cannot be in possession of without acting on."

When Garment persisted, the President later instructed Haldeman: "No, I'll have to put that off... No tell him, tell him that I feel very personally... Gave him a little bull..."

Campaign treasurer Hugh Sloan also refused to participate in the Watergate cover-up. "He has a compulsion to cleanse his soul by confession," John Dean reported scornfully to the President. "We are giving him a lot of velvet-gloved into misrepresenting the facts."

The President's chief congressional operative, Bryce Harlow appears in the transcripts as a man who wouldn't use the strong-arm methods favored by

Nixon. For example, Haldeman heard that House Speaker Carl Albert had asked GAO auditors to probe the White House.

"Well, (expletive deleted) the Speaker of the House," snorted Haldeman. "Maybe we better put a little heat on him."

Agreeing, the President suggested: "Why don't you see if Harlow will tell him that."

"Because he wouldn't do it," said Haldeman.

The White House tried without success to obstruct the FBI investigation of Watergate. Less than a week after the Watergate break-in, Haldeman asked the CIA to intervene with the FBI to limit the Watergate investigation to the five men who were arrested inside Democratic Party headquarters. "It is the President's wish," declared Haldeman.

John Dean also withheld incriminating documents, covered up other evidence and sent FBI agents chasing false leads. But the FBI pressed ahead with the investigation, undeterred.

When FBI director L. Patrick Gray had to be replaced, the President needed someone with a reputation for integrity to take over. He selected William Ruckelshaus.

In a burst of bravado, the President told Assistant Attorney General Henry Petersen: "(Ruckelshaus) will cooperate with the investigation... Well, he's Mr. Clean, you know, so you understand."

Later, Ruckelshaus was moved up to Deputy Attorney General. When spe-

cial prosecutor Archibald Cox turned over a few stones that implicated the President, he ordered Ruckelshaus to fire him. Mr. Clean refused.

Attorney General Elliot Richardson also stood up to the President over the same incident, refusing to compromise his integrity.

The White House tapes also show that the President couldn't control the three lowly prosecutors who made up the original Watergate team. Under presidential prodding, Henry Petersen tried to limit the Watergate investigation. He reported to the President on April 17 that he had told chief prosecutor Earl Silbert: "Damn it Silbert keep your eye on the mark. We are investigating Watergate. We are not investigating the whole damn realm of politics."

But the three prosecutors would not back down. Even Haldeman grudgingly praised Silbert. "It is a damn good prosecuting lawyer like Silbert to get a key witness to tumble," Haldeman grumped, referring to the detection of Jeb Magruder.

Later Haldeman brought his attorneys, John Wilson and Frank Stricker, in to see the President. "Bear in mind," the feisty, old Wilson told Nixon, "that we have a group of zealous—uh, particularly in Seymour Glazer who is a fire-eating prosecutor, and uh—these zealots, always shoot for the top."

But it was Judge John Sirica who made the White House crowd the most nervous. He had been an obscure federal judge, one of 450 district judges in

the United States. But this obscure judge, this son of an Italian immigrant, stood up to the most powerful man in the country. He challenged the President of the United States.

The President anxiously discussed Sirica's actions on April 17, 1973, with then Secretary of State William Rogers. Commented Rogers: "The only reason a judge questions a defendant when there's a plea of guilty... is to make sure that he's pleading voluntarily and that he knows the nature of his pleading."

"But Sirica has exceeded that hasn't he, Bill?" asked the President. "That's the point." Later in the conversation, Rogers got to the heart of the problem. "(Sirica) was suspicious," said Rogers, "there was a cover-up."

The President also expressed a secret respect for Senate Watergate Chairman Sam Erwin (D-N.C.), whom Nixon said "works harder than most of our Southern gentlemen." The only approach that would work with Erwin, Nixon suggested, was the statesman-like approach.

"Maybe," said the President, "you can tell Erwin on the mountaintop that this is a good way to set up a procedure for the future... We are making a lot of history here, senator... We are setting a stirring precedent."

The transcripts make perfectly clear that President Nixon's suspicion and hostility permeated the White House with apprehension, jealousy and moral rot. But there were also good men who were not afflicted.