

Tom Braden

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The March 21 Meeting—In Perspective

Richard Nixon has given us so many versions of what he learned during his famous meeting with John Dean on March 21, 1973, that we are in danger of losing sight of an important fact.

The fact is that the President did know and has stated that he knew that on that date payments were being made to the Watergate defendants.

Let us assume for a moment that you are President of the United States on March 21, 1973, and that you are possessed of normal standards of honesty and probity.

One of your assistants comes into your office and says, in effect, "Mr. President, you remember the burglary at the Watergate? We are spending your campaign money to take care of the families of the men who were caught in that burglary, and to pay their legal fees."

What would you say and what would you do? Would you lean back in your chair and "examine all the options"? Would you say, "That would be perfectly legal," as Mr. Nixon has subsequently said of such payments?

Or would you say something like this: "That money was raised to re-elect the President of the United States. No-

body in this office is going to use it to support burglars. This is a case of the United States vs. burglars. Why are you using the office of the President to pay for legal advice and support to those whom the United States is prosecuting?"

But Mr Nixon has fixed us on the question of whether or not he said it would be wrong to pay hush money, and whether or not he said it would be wrong to give clemency.

Speaking of that March 21 meeting last August, he said, "I was told then that funds had been raised for payments to the defendants . . . but I was told only that the money had been used for attorneys' fees and family support, not that it had been paid to procure silence from the recipients."

As though money for attorneys' fees and family support were not worth mentioning.

Later, Mr. Nixon changed his story. "I was told then (on March 21) that payments had been made to the defendants for the purpose of keeping them quiet, not simply for their defense."

And still later, he said, "It was al-

leged that the payments that had been made to the defendants were for the purpose of keeping them quiet."

Mr. Nixon is a lawyer, and he has us concentrating on the law, which holds it to be a crime to pay hush money or to bribe a man with an offer of clemency. He wants it understood that the President of the United States is "not a crook." And even if the tape of that March 21 meeting should prove him wrong, it is only that those who listen to it might have a different interpretation. "I know," he has said, "what I meant."

But a man who is "not a crook" is not necessarily an honest man. We do not have to find Mr. Nixon guilty of a crime in order to find him dishonest.

Ask yourself again the question, "What would I have done if I had learned that funds given to me by people who believed in me and wanted to secure my re-election were being used to support burglars? Would I have said, 'That would be perfectly legal' and kept quiet about it for 40 days?"

Now ask yourself whether you think the President of the United States is an honest man.