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Focusing on the March 21 Meeting

It has come to this. A President is begging the nation to believe that 1,200 pages of transcripts, edited by him, are "ambiguous" concerning his involvement in a criminal conspiracy to obstruct justice.

It is a measure of Mr. Nixon's desperation that he has struggled to focus public attention on the March 21, 1973, conversation, during which, at one point, he commanded the payment of hush money, and following which (not surprisingly) hush money was paid.

Why focus attention on this hisgrace? The key is in his assertion that March 21 was when he first learned there was a cover-up. He hopes the March 21 transcript, read in the light of this assertion, will seem ambiguous.

But the transcripts demonstrate that the assertion is not truthful.

In his carefully crafted written statement of Aug. 15, 1973, Mr. Nixon denied Mr. Dean's assertion that he knew about the cover-up on September 15, 1972: "Not only was I unaware of any cover-up, but at that time, and until March 21, I was unaware that there was anything to cover up."

But the March 13, 1973, conversation

"The key is Mr. Nixon's assertion that March 21 was when he first learned there was a cover-up."

includes this exchange between Mr. Dean (D) and Mr. Nixon (P):
D. Chapin didn't know anything about the Watergate.
P. Don't you think so?
D. Absolutely not.
P. Strachan?
D. Yes.
P. He knew?
D. Yes.
P. About the Watergate?
D. Yes.

Gordon Strachan was the principal political aide to White House chief-of-staff H. R. Haldeman. Both have been indicted.

But on March 13, 1973, Mr. Dean assured Mr. Nixon that the authorities "would have one hell of a time proving that Strachan had knowledge of it." Mr. Dean assured Mr. Nixon that Mr. Strachan had "stonewalled" in the past

and would do so again. To "stonewall" is to lie to authorities by professing complete ignorance of whatever is under investigation.

So Mr. Nixon was not truthful when he said, last Aug. 15, that until March 21 he was unaware of any cover-up, or anything that needed covering up. The fact that Mr. Nixon deceived the nation about when he learned about the cover-up should condition how we read the earlier transcripts.

On March 13 Mr. Dean suggested a "there it all is" approach" to releasing the truth about Watergate, an approach Mr. Nixon called "let it all hang out." But Mr. Nixon said: "we have passed that point." Mr. Nixon thus acknowledged that "all" had not been told, and he ruled out doing so.

Back on February 28, in another long, rambling talk with Mr. Dean, Mr.

Nixon wondered why there had been a delay in sentencing the original seven Watergate defendants. He guessed that Judge John Sirica was trying to "break them down." Dean assured Mr. Nixon the defendants were "hanging in tough" and Mr. Nixon pondered giving them clemency in six months.

Obviously Mr. Nixon and Mr. Dean, soulmates at this point, meant that the defendants were being "tough" in not "breaking down" and telling Judge Sirica everything they knew about White House involvement.

Moments later Mr. Nixon mentioned that his policy regarding the upcoming Senate Watergate hearings would be to avoid comment unless "they break through." Through what? To what? Through the cover-up to the facts about White House involvement.

The transcript indicates that on Feb. 28, Mr. Nixon and Mr. Dean were amicable partners in a complicated, doomed attempt to "stonewall" the investigation of Watergate. But as Mr. Nixon knows, the question now is not, "what do the transcripts mean?" but rather, "does the House of Representatives mean business."