

# A President's Fateful Reversal

## After Early Decision to Destroy Tapes, Nixon Changed His Mind

By George Lardner Jr. and Walter Pincus

Washington Post Staff Writers

**T**he day after White House counsel John W. Dean III started talking to Watergate prosecutors, President Richard M. Nixon ordered his secret White House tapes destroyed, according to newly transcribed conversations from the Nixon era.

It was Monday, April 9, 1973, months before the secret White House recording system would be disclosed at Senate hearings. Neither Nixon nor his top aide, White House Chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman, knew for certain that Dean had begun telling prosecutors what he knew about the burglary and subsequent efforts to thwart investigators. But the day before, Dean, who had coordinated the Watergate coverup, had told Haldeman he was considering some limited disclosures to authorities.

"Well, the hell with Dean," Nixon told Haldeman that Monday morning in the Oval Office. "Frankly, I don't want to have in the record discussions we've had in this room on Watergate." In another conversation later in the day, the president agreed with Haldeman that they ought to "get rid" of the recordings.

These previously unpublished conversations, among hundreds transcribed for The Washington Post and Newsweek, show Nixon quickly grasping the dangers his tapes contained. The tapes, which have been in the custody of the National Archives for two decades, also reveal new insights into the president as a manipulative, master politician overseeing every detail: approving a "shakedown" of the milk lobby for surreptitious campaign donations, fixing the price of ambassadorships, orchestrating "dirty tricks" against opponents, thanking the donor of hush money for the Watergate burglars.

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President Richard Nixon and Chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman in undated Oval Office photo. NATIONAL ARCHIVES

■ Long before Watergate, Nixon had a role in political mischief. Page A19

■ The man behind Watergate hush money got a thank-you. Page A19

**THE NIXON TAPES**

Look, if we went in in sackcloth and ashes and fired  
realize that isn't going to satisfy these Goddamn

# Nixon's Calculations About White House

the whole White House staff, Price doesn't  
cannibals.

## Tapes Preceded Public Disclosure



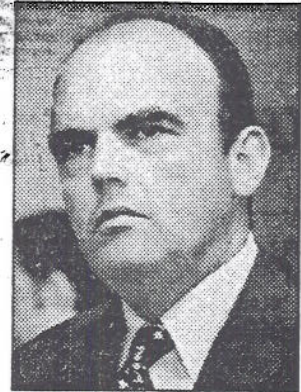
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**JOHN W. DEAN III:** *The White House counsel had spoken with Nixon about the Watergate defendants wanting hush money.*



FILE PHOTO

**H.R. HALDEMAN:** *On April 9, 1973, the president agreed with his chief of staff that they ought to "get rid" of the tape recordings.*



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**JOHN EHRLICHMAN:** *Nixon wanted his top domestic adviser and Haldeman to work out "sort of a game plan" to counter Dean.*



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**JOHN N. MITCHELL:** *Nixon indicated there would be "a total pardon" for his aides, including the former attorney general.*

Hell, they aren't after Ehrlichman or Haldeman or Dean.

They're after me, the President. They hate my guts.

#### TAPES, From A1

As the Watergate crisis mounted in the spring of 1973, the tapes also show Nixon trying one ploy after another to keep the scandal from engulfing his presidency and, in the process, calculating how to handle the tapes. After deciding to get rid of them, he then changed his mind. Alert to the hazard they posed, he nevertheless soon became forgetful again, even promising a "total pardon" for his implicated top aides as the recording machines continued to pick up his words.

Until now, it has been widely believed that Nixon did not consider destroying his tapes until after White House aide Alexander Butterfield publicly revealed their existence to the Senate Watergate Committee on July 16, 1973. Nixon asserted in his memoirs that he decided against it after long discussions with his aides in the wake of Butterfield's testimony. He was persuaded, he wrote, that destroying them then would "create an indelible impression of guilt," far more damaging than any revelations they contained. He also assumed, as one historian has written, that they were as sacrosanct as any presidential document, fully protected by the legal doctrine of executive privilege.

What Nixon failed to mention in his memoirs was his initial decision to destroy the tapes, before any outsider learned of them, and how that decision—which might have saved his presidency—was eroded by a desire to use them, selectively, for his own defense and for his autobiography.

Forced to resign in disgrace in August 1974, Nixon spent the rest of his life trying to put the tapes behind him, litigating against fresh disclosures and winning status as an elder statesman with a series of memoirs, foreign policy pronouncements and carefully scripted appearances.

But the more than 200 hours of newly

transcribed tapes reflecting "abuses of governmental power"—as the National Archives has categorized these conversations—will serve as a counterweight to that carefully burnished image. Sixty hours of tapes had previously been released starting in the 1970s.

Nixon's first instinct was to destroy them. He did not follow that instinct, and they helped destroy his presidency.

At the White House on April 9, Nixon did not elaborate on incriminating discussions he'd had with Dean. But other newly transcribed tapes show that in subsequent weeks he fretted over a long talk they had on March 21, 1973. During that session, Dean had warned Nixon of "a cancer on the presidency" and tried to bring the point home by emphasizing that the original Watergate defendants were demanding hush money—perhaps as much as \$1 million.

"We could get that," Nixon had told Dean in a taped conversation that became public during the 1974 House impeachment inquiry. "And you could get it in cash. I know where it could be gotten. . . . It would seem to me that would be worthwhile."

During the previously undisclosed Oval Office conversations between Nixon and Haldeman, nearly three weeks after Nixon's talk with Dean, the president recalled that he and the counsel had "discussed a lot of stuff." But Nixon then mused that some tapes might be worth keeping to prove that he never ordered the June 17, 1972, Watergate break-in and bugging of Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate complex.

"Maybe we ought to keep the [tapes for] the whole goddamn campaign period," Nixon told Haldeman on April 9. "We can prove we never discussed anything pertaining to the crummy Watergate. . . . When you think of all the discussions we've had in this room, that goddamn thing never came up."

Haldeman threw cold water on the idea. "Who you going to prove it to?" he asked. Nixon's opponents, Haldeman said, "could also argue that, you know—"

Nixon finished the sentence for him: "—that

we destroyed stuff?"

"Well, you discussed that," Haldeman replied.

By that afternoon, the matter seemed settled. Haldeman told Nixon he would review the tapes, "pull out what we want, and get rid of the rest of it." The discussion was elliptical, but they appeared inclined to preserve conversations pertaining to "the national security."

"And we want to get rid of the rest of it," Haldeman repeated.

"That's right," Nixon agreed.

At that point, Haldeman tried to explain to Nixon how the taping system was triggered automatically by the Secret Service "locator signal that tells what office you're in." If Nixon wasn't in a particular room, the tape recorders remained off. The two men tentatively decided to dismantle the system and install a new telephone recording device that Nixon could activate with a switch. The meeting ended with

Nixon, notoriously inept with mechanical devices, sounding a bit uncertain about how to operate the gadget Haldeman showed him.

Suspicious about Dean had intensified the day before, when the boyish-looking lawyer called Haldeman at Nixon's retreat in San Clemente, Calif., to say that his lawyers wanted him to meet with prosecutors. Dean has said he tried to assuage Haldeman by telling him the prosecutors were pursuing only those who had authorized the Watergate bugging, such as former attorney general John N. Mitchell, not those involved in a coverup. Haldeman had warned Dean to hold off because "once the toothpaste is out of the tube, it's going to be very tough to get it back in," according to Dean's subsequent accounts.

The tapes and the taping system came up again on April 16 and April 18, at the president's morning meetings with Haldeman. Nixon had changed his mind. He didn't want to get rid of the tapes just yet and he wanted to keep the machines going. Nixon had just discovered that Dean was pointing an accusing finger at Haldeman and domestic affairs adviser John D. Ehrlichman, and the president wanted his two top aides to work out "sort of a game plan."

"Incidentally," Nixon asked Haldeman on April 16, "is this [taping] equipment working at the present time, or has it been removed, do you know?"

"I think it's still working," Haldeman told him.

"Fine," Nixon said.

On April 18, Nixon told Haldeman to "take all these tapes" and review them, "as a service to the [future Nixon] library." He also wanted Haldeman to determine how damaging they were and whether any might be helpful.

"In other words, I'd like it if there's some material there that's probably worth keeping," Nixon told his chief of staff. "Most of it is worth destroying."

The president also made clear that he did not want to shut the "damn" system down. "You know what I mean," Nixon said. "You never know what conversation is [going to be] interesting and so forth and so on."

Haldeman agreed. "[It's] not a bad thing for you to have," he told Nixon.

Nixon's change of heart may have been spurred by the uneasy session he'd had with Dean on the night of April 15. The Watergate prosecutors—Earl Silbert, Seymour Glanzer and Donald Campbell—had notified the high command at Justice that Dean was helping them build an obstruction of justice case

against Haldeman and Ehrlichman. In an interview last week, Dean said he believed the prosecutors were going to keep his cooperation to themselves, because once senior Justice officials learned of his help the news "would get right back to Nixon."

As Dean feared, the high command, Attorney General Richard G. Kleindienst and Assistant Attorney General Henry E. Petersen, promptly told the president. The newly transcribed Nixon tapes even show Petersen, on a White House phone in Nixon's presence, getting a rundown from Silbert on the afternoon of April 15.

"Essentially, it's unbelievable," Silbert told Petersen. "We have an obstruction case against Haldeman and Ehrlichman in the sense that they knew everything that was going on." Alluding to hush money set aside for the Watergate defendants, Silbert added, "I mean the \$350,000 comes from Haldeman."

Nixon summoned Dean for a meeting in the Old Executive Office Building that night. The president reported in his memoirs that Dean "seemed almost cocky," confident he would get immunity. By Dean's account, Nixon was posturing, trying to rehabilitate himself by telling Dean that their March 21 meeting was "the first time" Nixon had gotten "the whole picture."

"It was a lie," Dean wrote in his book, "Blind Ambition," but he went along with it. "Yes, sir," he said. Then Nixon leaned toward Dean and said with a soft laugh: "You know, that mention I made to you about a million dollars and so forth as no problem. . . . I was just joking, of course, when I said that."

Nixon apparently wanted to keep the tape of that April 15 meeting. On April 18, as Petersen later told special Watergate prosecutors, the president offered to let Petersen listen to it. But it was never found. The Secret Service testified at subsequent court hearings that the Old Executive Office Building recording machine probably ran out of tape earlier that weekend.

Haldeman listened to numerous tapes in the weeks ahead. For example, on April 26, 1973, Haldeman called Stephen B. Bull, a Nixon assistant, and asked him to pull "that stuff" out of the files "for the period from March 10th to March 23rd," according to the new tapes. "I don't know what form it's in," Haldeman said, "but put it in some kind of bag so it isn't obvious. And also get a machine that is technically capable of listening to it."

Haldeman continued to review the tapes even after Nixon forced him and Ehrlichman to resign on April 30. (Dean was fired.) Halde-

man's papers show that he also collected damaging notes and memos reflecting the coverup on return visits to the White House, in line with Nixon's instructions to put "the vulnerabilities" down on paper. In a handwritten summary dated May 7, 1973, Haldeman carefully described it as "Notes from P[resident's] file" and "fully privileged."

The reviews kept Haldeman acutely aware of the taping system even as Nixon once again grew inattentive to its presence. The two men met in Nixon's Old Executive Office Building hideaway suite on May 18, 1973, and the president distastefully recalled how Kleindienst, "that tower of jelly," and Petersen had told him April 15 that Haldeman and Ehrlichman should resign immediately. "A bunch of [expletive] stuff," the president told Haldeman, then added:

"What I mean to say is this. We're talking in the confidence of this room. I don't give a [expletive] what comes out on you or John or even on poor, damn, dumb John Mitchell. There is going to be a total pardon."

"Don't—don't even say that," Haldeman warned.

"You know it," Nixon went on, oblivious of the microphones. "You know it and I know it."

"No, don't say that," Haldeman protested again, to no avail.

In the midst of all this turmoil, Nixon expressed a keen sense of being cornered by his enemies. Even if he fired the whole White House staff, he told press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler on April 27, "that isn't going to satisfy these goddamn cannibals! . . . Hell, they aren't after Ehrlichman or Haldeman or Dean. They're after me! The president. They hate my guts. That's what they're after."

Nixon fought ferociously to prevent the tapes from falling into the hands of Watergate prosecutors, even to the point of triggering demands for his impeachment when he fired Watergate special prosecutor Archibald Cox in the "Saturday Night Massacre" of Oct. 20, 1973. He finally lost the legal battle in the Supreme Court the next summer and, shortly thereafter, his presidency. The tapes had brought him down.

"I had bad advice, bad advice from well-intentioned lawyers who had sort of a cockeyed notion that I would be destroying evidence," Nixon said years later in a videotaped interview. "I should have destroyed them."

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*Special correspondent Lucy Shackelford contributed to this report.*



**RICHARD M. NIXON:** *With daughter Tricia Cox behind him, the president announces his resignation on Aug. 8, 1974.*

FILE PHOTO/ASSOCIATED PRESS

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# President Nixon on . . .

## . . . a Political Shakedown

### *Linking Dairy Price Supports to Donations, President Wanted*

"Look here," the secretary of the Treasury told the president of the United States in the Oval Office. "If you have no objection, I'm going to tell them they've got to put so much money directly at your disposal."

"They" were three affluent dairy farmer organizations, which that very morning—March 23, 1971—had met with President Richard M. Nixon to press for higher milk price supports from the federal government.

With that parting remark, Treasury Secretary John B. Connally walked out the door and the president's chief of staff, H.R. Haldeman, walked in.

"We just made a decision on the dairy thing," Nixon told Haldeman, according to newly transcribed tapes of the late afternoon conversation. The president then recounted Connally's plan to squeeze as much money out of the three groups as he could for Nixon's 1972 reelection campaign.

Haldeman hesitated, reminding Nixon that the milk producers already planned to make a substantial donation to Nixon's upcoming reelection campaign. But Nixon

persisted, noting that he wanted Connally to "see if we can get more."

"We've given them the 85 percent of parity thing," Nixon explained, alluding to his plan to guarantee dairy farmers federal price supports that allowed them to recoup at least 85 percent of their production costs. "See, we're doing more than they ever expected. We're going all out, all out. . . . [Connally] knows them well, and he's used to shaking them down, and maybe he can shake them for a little more. You see what I mean?"

"They're committed to a million dollars this year," Haldeman said of the milk producers' campaign contribution pledge. "They're committed to \$90,000 a month."

These newly transcribed White House tapes dramatically illustrate Nixon's linkage of government price support increases with hefty campaign contributions, ties that had long been suspected but never confirmed. It was illegal then, as now, to link campaign contributions to specific government actions.

The tapes also demonstrate Nixon's direct and active role in the milk fund and other campaign financing



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**NIXON TAPES**

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### *Treasury Secretary to 'See if We Can Get More'*

arrangements. The raw quid pro quo—"shaking them down," in Nixon's phrase—is more blatant than any episodes that have emerged thus far in the investigation of 1996 campaign fund-raising abuses.

Although the milk producers' contributions to Nixon through dummy committees have been known for years and were the subject of several Watergate prosecution force investigations, the resulting charges never touched Nixon directly, either in court proceedings or in the 1974 articles of impeachment adopted by the House Judiciary Committee. Connally was tried and acquitted on charges of taking \$10,000 in illegal gratuities for his role in increasing milk price supports.

Other tapes show that Nixon took a continuing interest in the fortunes of his generous dairy supporters. Less than a year after his conversations with Connally and Haldeman, he expressed outrage when his own Justice Department aggressively investigated the milk industry's political shenanigans.

In a conversation with top aide John D. Ehrlichman on Feb. 2, 1972, the president demanded, "What in the hell

... [is] the Justice Department bringing a suit against the milk producers for?"

Ehrlichman replied that he had checked with Attorney General John N. Mitchell, who said the suit was one of "three choices, and all of them bad." The two other options involved "criminal charges against the officers of the milk producers" or doing nothing, which, Ehrlichman said, would trigger a congressional investigation.

"Well," Nixon said, "this gets it into the courts and it'll screw around for a while."

When Ehrlichman added that Mitchell "had talked this over with the milk producers" themselves, Nixon seemed reassured. "Just so he's talked it over with them," the president added.

The milk producers ultimately would acknowledge contributing about \$600,000 for the 1972 election through various channels. The Justice Department suit was settled in August 1974, the month Nixon resigned, with milk producers denying any illegal acts while agreeing to avoid such acts in the future.

—George Lardner Jr. and Walter Pincus

# ... Watergate Hush Money

*In the Oval Office, a Greek American Businessman Got a Personal*

On March 7, 1973, President Richard M. Nixon met in the Oval Office with one of his major campaign contributors, Thomas A. Pappas, to personally thank him for providing money that Nixon knew was being used as hush money for the Watergate burglars.

Pappas, who held joint Greek and U.S. citizenship and ran a \$200 million industrial complex in Greece, had contributed more than \$100,000 to Nixon in both 1968 and 1972. He has been identified in previously released Nixon White House tapes as the source of cash used to keep the Watergate defendants quiet. But newly transcribed conversations show for the first time that Nixon acknowledged Pappas's role with an Oval Office thank-you.

"I want you to know that . . . I'm aware of what you're doing to help out in some of these things that Maury's people and others are involved in," Nixon told Pappas, referring to GOP fund-raiser Maurice Stans. "I won't say anything further, but it's very seldom you find a friend like that, believe me."

Five days earlier, White House Chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman told Nixon that Pappas had provided funds for "one of the major problems" that White House counsel John W. Dean III "is working on." Haldeman described the problem as "the question of . . . continuing financial activity in order to keep those people all in place," an

apparent reference to funds provided to the seven defendants convicted in the Watergate burglary.

"And the way he's working on that," Haldeman continued, "is via [Attorney General John] Mitchell to Tom Pappas." Haldeman described Pappas as "the best source we've got for that kind of thing."

In a recent telephone interview, Dean said, "Mitchell, through [aide Frederick] LaRue, was dealing with Pappas to get money for the coverup." Pappas, who was investigated but never charged in the Watergate scandal, became a leading fund-raiser for Gerald R. Ford's 1976 campaign. When his name first surfaced in the Watergate affair in 1974, Pappas denied he was asked for money by Mitchell or LaRue. He died at his Palm Beach, Fla., estate in 1988.

Haldeman also bluntly told Nixon on March 2, 1973, what Pappas wanted in exchange for his financial contributions. "Pappas is extremely anxious that [U.S. Ambassador to Greece Henry J.] Tasca stay in Greece," Haldeman said. Tasca, a career diplomat who had been selected as envoy to Athens in September 1969, had a close relationship with both Pappas and Nixon. Pappas also was closely affiliated with the junta of colonels who ran Greece in the early 1970s and who continued to receive U.S. military aid during the Nixon administration.

## Thank-You

"Let him stay," Nixon quickly said of Tasca. "Let him stay. No problem. Pappas has raised the money we need for this other activity."

When Nixon then asked how Pappas did it, Haldeman responded that he had sold one of his companies and was "one of the unknown John Paul Gettys of the world or something now. . . . And he's able to deal in cash."

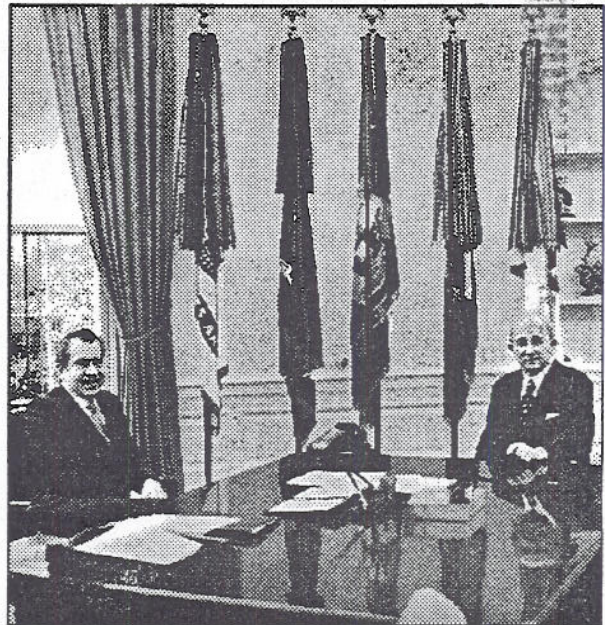
Later, when the first news accounts disclosed that hush money had been paid to the Watergate defendants, Nixon recalled his meeting with Pappas.

"I didn't discuss this, believe me," Nixon told Haldeman on April 26, 1973. "Pappas was, said he was helping on, uh . . . helping Mitchell on certain things. And I said, 'Well, that's fine, thank you.' But I, he didn't tell me what it was."

Then, in a burst of candor, Nixon recalled, "I think it's a matter of fact though that somebody said be sure to talk to Pappas because he's being very helpful on the, uh, Watergate thing."

Haldeman reminded Nixon that he was the one who had suggested the president see Pappas, but added, "I don't think I said Watergate thing. . . . I said Mitchell wants you to be sure and talk to Pappas. He's been very helpful."

—Walter Pincus and George Lardner Jr.



FILE PHOTO/ASSOCIATED PRESS

**FRIEND WITH FUNDS:** "I'm aware of what you're doing," Nixon told Thomas A. Pappas.

# ... Ambassadorships for Sale

## *So Not Just Any Friends or Contributors Would Get Coveted Foreign*

While presidents have long bestowed U.S. ambassadorships on big campaign contributors, Richard M. Nixon put a specific price tag on the practice.

"My point is, my point is that anybody who wants to be an ambassador must at least give \$250,000," the president told White House Chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman on June 23, 1971, according to a newly transcribed tape.

"Yeah," Haldeman agreed, and then proposed a minimal donation threshold. "I think any contributor under \$100,000 we shouldn't consider for any kind of thing."

Nixon pointed out that "we helped" Fred J. Russell, a millionaire California real estate baron and Republican donor who would soon be named ambassador to Denmark. "But from now on," the president continued, "the contributors have got to be, I mean, a big thing and I'm not gonna do it for political friends and all that crap."

The conversation had started with Nixon asking about

Belgium. "The ambassador to Brussels, that hasn't been promised to anybody, has it?" he inquired.

When Haldeman said no, Nixon noted that his friend and fund-raiser Charles "Bebe" Rebozo had told him that Raymond Guest, who was ambassador to Ireland during the Kennedy administration, wanted Brussels.

"I'm sure he's talking about a quarter of a million at least," Nixon said, "cause he gave \$100,000 last time, about 65 in one place and 35 in another. Now, he could be ambassador to Brussels. Find out when [the current ambassador to Belgium, John] Eisenhower leaves." As for Guest, Nixon added: "Uh, he's fine. His wife speaks French, he speaks French, uh, uh, but the cost is uh, a quarter of a million." Nixon indicated that his personal lawyer and another fund-raiser, Herbert W. Kalmbach, had set that minimum price as part of his solicitations of big donors for the 1972 election campaign. (Guest was never selected for the Brussels post.)

## *Posts, Nixon Set a Minimum Price of \$250,000*

Haldeman agreed on the need to charge a hefty price for coveted foreign posts. "We sure, you know, there's a temptation to sell those posts for—"

Nixon finished the sentence: "—cheap price."

That fall, on Oct. 18, 1971, another ambassadorial appointment was discussed in the Oval Office by Nixon and his longtime secretary, Rose Mary Woods. Woods reported reading in the newspaper that a New York socialite, C.V. "Sonny" Whitney, was to be named U.S. ambassador to Spain.

Nixon had been unaware of that, but indicated his approval. "Hell, if we did it, it was a great sale," the president said. "He gave a quarter of a million dollars."

Little over a month later, on Nov. 29, Whitney's name came up again in a conversation with Haldeman.

Attorney General John N. "Mitchell and/or [GOP fund-raiser Lee] Nunn," Haldeman said, "made a deal with him for 250."

Nixon, however, had been having second thoughts. He was afraid he couldn't win Senate confirmation of the 72-year-old Whitney and thus couldn't make good on his part of the bargain. Congress at the time was debating campaign finance reform and one focus was the succession of major contributors getting ambassadorial posts.

Haldeman suggested a refund. "We'll just tell Whitney we've got to get ... the 250 back to him," he said. If Whitney were nominated "he'd have to reveal his financial support," Haldeman added. "He'd have to lie or reveal it. And that would be a mess too."

Nixon told Haldeman to return Whitney's money. "The 250 can go back," the president said. "I don't want the money. Just say that in view of the present temper—put it on the Senate. But I'd say we just don't want him to be embarrassed. There's no way we can get him confirmed."

—Walter Pincus and George Lardner Jr.

# ... Dirty Tricks

## *Worried About Muskie, President Schemed to Divide Democrats*

Long before the Watergate scandal, President Richard M. Nixon demonstrated an aptitude for political mischief, according to newly transcribed tape recordings from the Nixon White House.

For example, as 1971 came to a close, Nixon expressed concern that the chief obstacle to his reelection in November 1972 was Sen. Edmund S. Muskie of Maine, who had emerged as the leading Democratic contender.

Brainstorming in the Oval Office with his top political aide, Charles W. Colson, on Dec. 23, 1971, Nixon wondered aloud whether Muskie could be weakened by a strong challenge from another Democrat. "Should something be done to finance one of the Democratic candidates?" he asked Colson.

When Colson suggested Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) might fit the bill, Nixon warmed to the idea.

"Yeah. Put this down: I would say, a postcard mailing to all Democrats in New Hampshire," where the first presidential primary would take place in little over two months. "Write in Ted Kennedy," Nixon dictated. "Get every Democrat in the state."

Colson estimated the anonymous postcard campaign touting Kennedy as a write-in candidate could be undertaken for "just a few thousand dollars."

Three weeks later, on Jan. 12, 1972, Nixon and Colson again conferred on the Muskie threat.

"We got to get Muskie, you know, out on the limb on some of these critical issues," Nixon said. This time the president was looking ahead to the critical Florida primary.

"Now, get a massive mailing in Florida that he's against

[FBI Director] J. Edgar Hoover, a massive mailing that he's for busing," Nixon urged. "Put the necessary funds into getting mailings to every Democrat that he is for busing, that he is against Hoover and he's against the space shuttle." These mailings, Nixon added, would be deceptively arranged "on the basis that it came from [Muskie], see?"—in an effort to baffle voters about Muskie's real positions.

The secret Kennedy write-in project was undertaken first, sowing confusion and mutual suspicion among the Democrats. On Feb. 22, 1972, Kennedy—in an effort to reassert his non-candidacy—asked that his name be removed from the Wisconsin and Oregon ballots. When the March 7 primary was held in New Hampshire, Kennedy received only 954 write-in votes, but the Democratic race was in turmoil.

As for the Florida primary, Muskie's candidacy had already taken a nose dive after a mediocre showing in New Hampshire, so Nixon's mass mailing became irrelevant.

Nixon's 1972 reelection campaign became infamous for a variety of "dirty tricks" intended to disrupt the political opposition, and it was in that climate that the Watergate bugging attempt transpired. The tapes show Nixon calculating how to divide and conquer the Democrats more than a year before the election.

For example, on Oct. 6, 1971, Harry Dent, a White House political aide, told Nixon he had been talking to John Rollins, a Delaware businessman and major GOP contributor. Rollins had an unusual idea he was willing to bankroll, Dent said.

## *by Secretly Promoting Others*

Nixon coyly indicated that he was aware of the scheme. Rollins "should not talk to me," Nixon said. "He mentioned it a little bit. I mustn't know one thing about it." Later in the conversation, without offering specifics, the president assured Dent, "It can be done."

The mystery is somewhat clarified in a tape recording three weeks later, on Oct. 29, when Chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman asked Nixon if Rollins had discussed secretly funding an independent black candidacy to pull votes away from the Democrats.

"Oh, yeah," Nixon responded.

As Haldeman explained, Rollins proposed running "newspaper ads for a committee to elect Jesse Jackson." Republican operatives would then send campaign contributions to Jackson in an effort to make him believe there was a grass-roots movement for his candidacy.

Rollins "says what we do is, we get our people out, we get these old \$1 bills—you don't want to get the new, shiny ones—with the old ones, it looks like people have been saving it all their lives," Haldeman continued. "And so we plug those in, you know, a dollar apiece, you know, and from 4 [thousand] or 5,000 people, scattered around.

"You do that two or three times and Jackson will start thinking people really want him to be president. . . . And after his ego is going, then you can't turn him off."

It is unclear whether the White House scheme to encourage a black candidacy in 1972 was ever put into effect.

—Walter Pincus and George Lardner Jr.



1975 FILE PHOTO/THE WASHINGTON POST

**WRITE-IN PLOY:** Nixon plan solicited votes for Sen. Kennedy, left, against Sen. Muskie.