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Nixon Off the Record

For the first time, in newly transcribed tapes, hear how Nixon set up his own fall. It's 1971, and he wants dirt on the Democrats—even if it means burglary. His order: 'Get it done.' BY EVAN THOMAS AND LUCY SHACKELFORD

FOR RICHARD NIXON, THE wedding of his eldest daughter, Tricia, to Edward Cox on June 12, 1971, was a golden PR opportunity. As usual, Nixon had been obsessing about the Kennedys. It infuriated him that Jack Kennedy had always been portrayed as a warm and loving father, frolicking for the cameras with his children. Always eager to learn from his enemies, Nixon figured that he, too, could manipulate the press into picturing him as a family man. Elaborately staged in the Rose Garden, the First Daughter's wedding, Nixon predicted, would be "the biggest news story going," according to his chief of staff, H. R. (Bob) Haldeman. The massive coverage would, Nixon thought, "jell the family feeling."

So when Nixon picked up *The New York Times* on Sunday, June 13, he was surprised to see that his daughter's wedding was not the lead story after all. The *Times* had obtained the U.S. government's own secret history of the Vietnam War: the "Pentagon papers." Nixon was miffed: those New York liberals who ran the

Times, he believed, were always out to get him. Yet, as he talked to his advisers, Nixon began to see the Pentagon papers as an opportunity to be exploited. Nixon seemed almost gleeful as he plotted with his aides. The conversations were all recorded on Nixon's White House taping system. But unlike the later Watergate tapes, which brought Nixon down in 1974, these earlier recordings from the summer of '71 were not made public for two decades. Gradually released by the National Archives beginning in 1993, the tapes of Nixon's early plotting have been transcribed by *NEWSWEEK* and *The Washington Post*; many of them are published here for the first time. They reveal, in a way that has never been clearly understood before, how Nixon sowed the seeds of his own self-destruction.

Nixon's post-Pentagon papers plan, which he discussed with his advisers throughout June and July, was truly Nixonian in its deviousness. Publicly, the administration would react harshly and indignantly. The Justice Department would go after the *Times* and *The Washington Post* (which owns *NEWSWEEK*) for endangering national security by publishing such sensi-

tive secrets. Meanwhile, Nixon's men would dig up dirt on the leaker, a disaffected former Defense Department official named Daniel Ellsberg. But Nixon's most twisted inspiration was to use Ellsberg as a model—to try, in effect, to replicate the leak of the Pentagon papers on a far grander scale. The 7,000-page study obtained by the *Times* showed that Democrats—Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson—were mostly to blame for getting the United States into Vietnam. As Nixon thought about it, he asked, Why stop at Vietnam? Why not tell the secret story of how Democrats nearly started World War III over Cuba and Berlin and dragged the country into Korea and World War II? If the truth were known, Nixon believed, the president who would come off looking by far the worst—reckless and callow—was Nixon's old nemesis, John F. Kennedy.

Nixon's first act after the publication of the Pentagon papers was to punish the *Times*. Not only would Justice Department lawyers seek to enjoin further publication of the classified documents, but the newspaper was to be completely cut off by the White House. No interviews were to be

granted to Times reporters without "express permission from the P [the president], which he does not intend to grant," wrote Haldeman in his diary on Tuesday, June 15. Almost three weeks later, on July 5, Nixon was still fulminating about the Times: "They'll begin to realize they've paid a hell of a price for this."

As for Ellsberg, Nixon wanted him "destroyed." "We're up against an enemy, a conspiracy, that is using any means," the president said to Haldeman and Henry Kissinger on July 1. "We are going to use any means," Nixon declared, pounding the desk with each word. "Is that clear?" He believed that Ellsberg's conspiracy was being run out of the Brookings Institution, a left-leaning think tank. "I want a break-in," ordered Nixon on June 30. "Get it done ... I want the Brookings safe cleaned out. And have it cleaned out in a way that makes somebody else look bad." There was no point in waiting for the FBI to investigate Ellsberg for stealing classified secrets, said Nixon. On July 2, Nixon said he had talked to J. Edgar Hoover, and the FBI director was "farting about." The White House would have to take matters into its own hands. Don't bother waiting for Ellsberg to be tried in court, he instructed aide John Ehrlich-

man. "Just get everything out ... Everything, John ... Get it out, leak it out. I want to destroy him in the press; is that clear?"

To Nixon, Ellsberg was another Alger Hiss. As a young congressman, Nixon had made his name exposing Hiss, a State Department official and scion of the Eastern establishment, as a Soviet spy. Nixon had done it by finding raw investigative files on Hiss and leaking them to reporters. "I can't emphasize too much [the importance of the Hiss case]," Nixon lectured his aides. "Nobody ever reads my biographies. Go back and read the chapter on the Hiss case in 'Six Crises,' and you'll see how it was done. It wasn't done waiting for the goddam courts or the attorney general or the FBI."

Nixon wanted to keep the Pentagon papers a "running sore." But he was intrigued by what they revealed—and very curious to learn what other classified documents might still be sitting in government files. The

Pentagon papers were only about U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Nixon, with his long Washington experience and conspiratorial turn of mind, thought there had to be much more to be found on what Republicans of his era called "Democrat wars." He wanted government files ransacked to find anything that could be leaked to smear past Democratic presidents. "We're gonna expose, God, Pearl Harbor," he said. The president apparently thought there were documents that would make FDR look responsible for the success of the Japanese attack on Dec. 7, 1941. "I'm going to give that to the Trib," said Nixon, referring to the then archconservative Chicago Tribune. "They hated Roosevelt so." Nixon was especially interested in JFK. He was sure there were damaging untold stories about the Bay of Pigs and about the Kennedy administration's brushes with nuclear war over Berlin in 1961 and during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. "The

Berlin wall. See, the Berlin wall is a pretty good little story," mused Nixon. To get these documents, many of which were top secret, he wanted to break into the National Archives. Ehrlichman proposed sending "the archivist out of town for a while," then photographing the documents and resealing them. "There are ways to do that?"

"I want a break-in ... I want the Brookings safe cleaned out. And have it cleaned out in a way that makes somebody else look bad."

—NIXON, plotting revenge for the Pentagon papers leak



At war: With Haldeman and Ehrlichman

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

asked Nixon. "Yes," replied Ehrlichman, "and nobody can tell we've been in there."

Nixon had a plan—but he had to have a good man to execute it. "What you really need is an Ellsberg—an Ellsberg who is on our side," Nixon said on June 24. "Who," he wondered aloud on July 1, "is going to break into the Brookings Institution? ... Who is going to be in charge of looking over the Pentagon papers [and] the papers on the Cuban missile crisis, on the Bay of Pigs, on World War II and Korea? Who the hell is [capable of] doing that and pulling out everything that might embarrass members of the establishment? See? Who's going to do that? ... I need a man, a commander, an officer in charge here in the White House that I can call when I wake up, as I did last night, at 2 in the morning, and I can say, 'Now, look here, I want to do this, this, this and this. Get going.' See my point?" The president wanted an "intellectual" who knew the history of the times, but, he said, "I can't have a high-minded lawyer. I want an s.o.b." The ideal person, Nixon said, would be, well, a young Dick Nixon—"somebody that's just

as tough as I was ... in the Hiss case, where we won in the press."

But who was that man? Charles Colson, Nixon's tough special counsel, had a suggestion. He knew a fellow, just retired after more than 20 years in the CIA, who was "hard as nails," a "brilliant writer who's written 40 books," who "scrambles. His name," said Colson, "is Howard Hunt ... He's kind of a tiger." Nixon was delighted. Hunt would be the chief operations officer—but, Nixon added, "I'll direct it myself. I know how to play this game. And we're going to start playing it."

Hunt joined up with several other undercover operators, mostly former CIA men, to plan covert activities. They nicknamed themselves, jokingly, "the Plumbers." Unfortunately for Nixon, they were incompetent. The former spook so effusively praised by Colson was a braggart; his "40 books" were mostly cheap spy novels. Colson only really knew Hunt through Brown University's Washington alumni chapter (Colson was the president, Hunt the vice president).

Hunt never did find much dirt on the Kennedys, or on any other president. Re-

sponding to a presidential order, CIA Director Richard Helms turned over some documents on the Bay of Pigs that summer of 1971, but the Nixonites decided the papers weren't useful. In desperation, Hunt forged a document implicating JFK in the assassination of President Diem in Vietnam in 1963. (In fact, Kennedy encouraged Diem's overthrow but not his murder.) Nixon had to be a bit careful, however, about exposing old assassination plots: the most notorious, against Fidel Castro of Cuba and Patrice Lumumba of the Congo, were ordered up in the Eisenhower administration, when Nixon was vice president.

There is no evidence that the Plumbers ever tried to break into Brookings or the National Archives. (Aides like Haldeman and Ehrlichman later said they played along with the president but did not carry out most of the schemes discussed in the White House.) They did, however, botch a burglary into the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist in September 1971. And in June 1972 they were caught breaking into Democratic headquarters at the Watergate—the public beginning of the end.

And Now, 'Tricky Dick'

The unguarded Nixon could be profane, prejudiced and paranoid as he plotted against his enemies

ALWAYS THE VICTIM, Richard Nixon believed that he had been the target of "dirty tricks" in past elections. As he prepared to run for a second term in the White House in 1972, Nixon planned to strike first. "You know we were ratted on in the '62 campaign [his failed race for governor of California]," Nixon told chief of staff H. R. Haldeman on April 15, 1971. "But we never found out who it was, did we? ... Now we're doing what they were doing to us." It's hard to imagine that any other candidate, no matter how nefarious, would sound as lowdown as the unvarnished Nixon does plotting against his enemies on newly transcribed White House tapes.

Federal agencies, Nixon believes, should be used as weapons of political revenge.



Abiding enmity: 'Who knows about the Kennedys?' Nixon asks

He wants the IRS to "go after a couple of media people ... Dan Schorr [then of CBS], Mary McGrory [then of The Washington Star] ..." and the immigration service to investigate "the wetback thing" at the Los Angeles Times. "Otis Chandler," Nixon says, naming the paper's publisher, "I

want him checked out with regard to his gardener. I understand he's a wetback." On Sept. 13, 1971, Nixon orders Haldeman to have the tax men go after prominent Democratic campaign donors. "Please get me the names of the Jews. You know," says Nixon, "the big Jewish con-

tributors of the Democrats ... Could we please investigate some of those c--suckers?" He wants the IRS to target the leading Democratic contenders for '72. "Are we looking into [Edmund] Muskie's returns?" he prods. "Hubert [Humphrey]? ... Who knows about the Kennedys?"

Shouldn't they be investigated?" He also wants to explore Muskie's private life, and is disappointed when aide John Ehrlichman tells Nixon that Muskie is "very cloistered, very frumpish." Nixon settles on sending out a massive mailing in Florida, reminding voters that Muskie supports busing and opposes the FBI's J. Edgar Hoover.

Teddy Kennedy seems a more promising target for personal mudslinging. Nixon wants to exploit the youngest Kennedy brother's 1969 car accident at Chappaquiddick. The president—whose political opponents once mockingly asked, "Would you buy a used car from this man?"—wants an advertisement made up that shows a picture of Kennedy with the caption "Would you ride in a car with this man?"