

Watergate: A Crisis of Public Relations

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At one point, Richard M. Nixon turns to his men and asks, "How do you handle that PR wise?" A not unusual question for an executive—including the President—to ask in this age of images, mass communications and public relations campaigns, to be sure.

Watergate, too, it now seems clear from reading the 1,254 pages of Nixon transcripts, was regarded by the President and his most trusted advisers as essentially a PR problem. Traumatic and troubling, yes, but basically a

problem to be handled by seizing the initiative, by minimizing the public impact, by cutting losses, by bold and vigorous counterattacks.

The Nixon men had a phrase for it: getting out in front. If successful,

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they would put the President "on top" and out of reach.

Listen, for instance, to the conversation between the President, H. R. (Bob) Haldeman, John D. Ehrlichman, John W. Dean III and John N. Mitchell on March 22 a year ago. It is the day

after Dean has reported on criminal involvement and they are discussing using Dean's report on his Watergate "investigation" so the White House can cite its striving for the full truth—and that Dean can use if he is called to testify.

The President: Well, on the Dean thing—you simply say, well, that [testifying] is out. Dean has made this report and here is everything Dean knows.

Ehrlichman: I think, John, on Monday you could say to Ervin if the question comes up, "I know the Presi-

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dent's mind on this and he has always indicated that the fruits of my investigation should be available to you." And just leave it at that for the time being.

Dean: One issue that may come up as the hearings go along is the fact that the focus on this book is that Dean knew — as you all know I was all over this thing like a wet blanket. I was everywhere—everywhere they look they are going to find Dean.

President: Sure.

Haldeman: Well, I don't think that is bad.

Ehrlichman: I don't either. You were supposed to be.

President: You were our investigator. You were directed by the President to get me all the facts. Second, as White House counsel you were on it to assist people in the executive branch who were being questioned. Say you were there for the purpose of getting information. That was your job.

Dean: That's right.

President: But the main point certainly is that Dean had absolutely no operational activity. The wonderful thing about your position is that as far as they are concerned—you position has never been as operative.

Moments later, the President continues: "... We've got to keep our eye on the Dean thing—just give them some of it—not all of it. I don't suppose they say John—no—we won't take it. Just take the heat. ..."

The conversation turns to

the possibilities of White House subpoenas being issued.

"They can subpoena any of U.S.," Dean says. "There is no doubts about that. If they don't serve it here [it's] because they can't get in. They can serve you at home somewhere. They can always find you."

Haldeman speaks up. "We move to Camp David and hide! They can't get in there."

Thus, as the drama slowly unfolds inside the White House, the Nixon men continually debate their PR and political strategies. They weigh the consequences of each possible move, rehearse their public statements, act out their various and constantly changing "scenarios," draft imaginary news accounts to determine the public reaction, check and counter-check.

March 27, the President, Haldeman, Ehrlichman and press secretary Ronald L. Zeigler are meeting to handle publicly a deteriorating situation. Finally, the President tells Ziegler:

"... Just get out there and act like your usual cocky, confident self."

Ziegler: Then if I am asked a question about whether or not Dean would appear before the grand jury, if I am asked that question—

President: Yeah.

Ziegler: How should I handle that?

President: That's tough.

Ziegler: I could—Two options: one would be to say that (unintelligible) the other would be to say the (unintelligible.)

After a brief exchange, the President suggests: "Why don't you say, 'We have indicated cooperation and when we see the form of the request, or whatever it is—'"

Ziegler, interrupting and continuing the dialogue to be delivered to the press: "These matters must proceed in an orderly manner and I am not going up here and comment on the possibility of—"

President: Of future action (unintelligible).

Ehrlichman: The other thing you might do is—this would put our friend John Dean III in a tough spot—say, "While there have been some accusations against him, he's really in the poorest position to defend himself of anybody in the government."

In the peculiar shorthand language they employed so familiarly in the privacy of their deliberations, the Nixon men spoke of "confining the situation," of "stonewalling," of "stroking" less resolute members of their team, of taking the "let-it-all-hang-out" or "the limited let-it-all-hange-out" of getting to the "bottom line."

What is singularly missing from these glimpses of life inside the White House is a sense of moral outrage, a ringing declaration from anyone, at any time, that wrongs had been committed that must be corrected.

Instead, by their own admittedly incomplete testimony, they reacted to the growing knowledge of possible Watergate-related

crimes—obstruction of justice, break-ins, burglaries, bugging, plans to commission prostitutes and mugging teams—by devising PR and political tactics to deal with them.

They spoke of trying to use, it would seem, everyone and everything at their command. The list is long and inclusive.

The FBI. The Attorney General. Senators Baker, Gurney and Goldwater. Prosecutor Henry Petersen. The grand jury. Secretary of State Rogers. The Library of Congress. The IRS. The Chief Justice. Judge Ritchie. Private records of past administrations to demonstrate that the Democrats—and Democratic Presidents—did it too. "Friendly" news organizations and newsmen favored with selective leaks. The "Dean Report."

National security, executive privilege and the constitutional doctrine of separation of powers also became vehicles in their public campaign of counterattack.

The final question of the guilt or innocence of these participants is still to be determined, but the record that has now been made public goes a long way to help understand the official climate and attitudes during the long months of the Watergate crisis.

What emerges is a picture of no master plot hatched by master conspirators, but of a desperate struggle to put the best face on a steadily worsening situation.

The President and his men are trapped by events, and those events begin to

have an inexorable life of their own that sweep the main actors along from scene to scene. They improvise. They deliberate. They see the tide turning in on them. They recognize, finally, that some—and maybe most—face criminal indictments and possible imprisonment.

As the transcripts make clear, they are all fighting to limit the scope of the investigations and the final consequences. They are trying to keep the inquiries focused on the event—the break-in and burglary at the Watergate office building on June 17, 1972. But Watergate will not stay within its channels; it spills out into other areas—the Ellsberg burglary case, the Huston surveillance plan, the Vesco affair.

The transcripts strongly indicate that few of them had a clear picture of any one aspect. Some know only a fragment, some have a larger understanding. The President appears, in these accounts, to have been the one person most in the dark.

Whatever his own knowledge—and these transcripts are open to questions since he, at least, knew that every word he uttered was being secretly recorded—his reaction to the disclosures is consistent from beginning to end. He, too, frequently views them as a PR-political problem to be confronted.

When Dean tells him on March 21 how Watergate really began—"It started with an instruction to me from Bob Haldeman to see if we couldn't set up a perfectly legitimate campaign intelli-

gence operation over at the re-election committee"—he listens quietly.

When Dean informs him of the Ellsberg break-in, he says, "Oh, yeah." When Dean explains, "I worked on a theory of containment—to try to hold it right where it was," he replies, "Sure," and, lies, "Sure," and "Right."

One of the most fascinating portraits of Mr. Nixon as President is in his relationship to his two key aides, Haldeman and Ehrlichman. They speak as equals. There is none of the "Sirs" that Dean always employs, none of the "Mr. President" that John Mitchell uses to address the Chief Executive.

Together, they argue out strategy and tactics—whether to go public, and in what form; whether to permit aides to testify; whether to appoint a special prosecutor; whether to yield on executive privilege and "national security."

In the end, the case unravels, but the PR struggle continues to this day.

Now those once-secret conversations have become a critical factor in the President's campaign to win public support. And even they come before the public with a touch of the PR man's hand about them.

They begin with a White House position paper affirming the President's innocence and an explanation that certain things were said not in the context of a criminal plot, "but rather in the politics of the matter" and the "handling of the political and public relations aspect of the matter."