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If Only Mr. Nixon Had Moved As Fast

By Don Oakley

On the evening of Monday, April 29, 1974, President Nixon told the nation that he was releasing the Watergate tape transcripts.

Whatever the other consequences of that unprecedented event, it was to lock two of the country's biggest paperback publishers in a race to hit the bookracks first with the largest "instant paperback" in history.

By late Tuesday, April 30, the Government Printing Office had issued the huge 1,308-page document. Two days later, both Bantam Books and Dell Books announced that they were publishing paperback editions, Bantam in collaboration with the New York Times and Dell in combination with the Washington Post.

The story of how Bantam won the race, as told in *Inland Printer/American Lithographer* magazine, is almost as fascinating as the transcripts themselves.

That same Thursday afternoon, the 1,300-plus pages of copy arrived at W. F. Hall Printing Co's plant in Chicago. Overtime shifts were scheduled. Equipment was allocated and production time set aside. Delivery dates for other paperbacks already in production were pushed back.

By air, Hall got the copy to the typesetter, E.T. Lowe Publishing Co. in Nashville, by 10 p.m. Thursday. Within an hour it was being set by four tape-driven linecasters and four manual linotypes. A team of seven proofreaders checked each galley proof twice.

Working around the clock, Lowe finished setting the transcripts' more than 250,000 words by 4 a.m. Saturday, May 4. There was a pause while typesetters waited for the book's introduction and other editorial material, which two Bantam editors delivered from New York at 6 p.m.

Typesetting was completed early Sunday morning and by 11 a.m. Lowe had started making up page forms. The Bantam editors supervised last-minute changes. As soon as the pages were locked up and approved, Lowe began making the first of 148 six-page bakelite molds.

Everything went smoothly and by mid-Saturday it became apparent that Lowe was going to beat its scheduled Monday deadline by hours. Because the next commercial flight from Nashville to Chicago was not until Monday morning, a private jet was engaged. The jet hurried from Cincinnati to Nashville and left for Chicago about 8 p.m. Sunday with the first load of molds. In Chicago, it turned around for Nashville to pick up the Bantam editors and the remaining molds, arriving in Chicago shortly after midnight.

The molds were rushed to Hall's plant, where vulcanizers turned out the book's rubber plates in eight hours, averaging about 110 plates an hour. The plates were then rushed to another Hall plant in the city and by 8 a.m. Monday, were on the offset presses.

In the meantime, four-color art for the book's cover had arrived at Regensteiner Press in Chicago on Saturday. Plates were ready late Sunday and the job began running by 1 a.m. Monday. It was off the press four hours later. The covers were then delivered in 2,000-sheet lifts to Hall's bindery, where they were varnished and cut apart.

At 6 p.m. Monday, the first of an eventual 1,400,000 copies came off the bindery line. Elapsed time from delivery of copy to finished product: 91 hours.

As the books came out of the bindery, they were packed in 10- and 25-book cartons. About 7 p.m. Monday, the first skid of books was wheeled onto a truck waiting to hustle them to O'Hare Airport. Within 12 hours, more than 100,000 copies had been bound and shipped.

About 5,000 copies arrived at District News Co. in Washington at 7:30 a.m. Tuesday, May 7. By 8 a.m., the first copies, (expletives deleted) and all, were on sale at the Trover Book Shop on Pennsylvania Avenue, one block from the White House.