

W. Post 5-1-74

Initial Reaction On Hill Divided Along Party Lines

By Haynes Johnson
Washington Post Staff Writer

The Nixon Watergate papers, the most extraordinary documents ever to come out of the White House, have been made public to the Congress and the American people.

They are massive in content (more than 200,000 words), riveting in language and characterization of public figures, and explosive in their revelations about the President's role in Watergate.

Release of the 1,254 pages of the secretly recorded conversations of crucial Watergate-related meetings from September, 1972, through April, 1973, came in two distinct installments yesterday.

The first segment, made public in the morning after the President's nationally televised address, was in the form of a White House summary of the conversations—in effect, an official "white paper" on the Watergate affair.

Its tone was that of a lawyer's brief, strongly arguing that the public disclosure will establish, once and for all, the President's innocence.

"In all of the thousands of words spoken," the White House summary said, "even though they often are unclear and ambiguous, not once does it appear that the President of the United States was engaged in a criminal plot to obstruct justice."

Throughout the morning and early afternoon an intensive White House public relations effort was under way across the country to reinforce that view. White House aides were calling editors and reporters in an attempt to demonstrate that the "truth" of Watergate, as now made public, completely absolves the President.

The immediate reaction on Capitol Hill divided along political lines. John Rhodes of Arizona, the House Republican leader, said the transcripts showed the President "in substantial compliance" with a House Judiciary Committee subpoena.

Democratic response tended to follow the lead of House Speaker Carl Albert. "Why substitute other evidence when the direct evidence [the actual tapes] is available?" he said.

Then, shortly after 3 p.m., the second wave struck in the release of the edited documents. They, clearly, were open to other interpretations than those given by the White House brief.

The conversations show the President discussing at length raising blackmail money; discussing the merits of offering clemency or parole; suggesting how to handle possible perjury or obstruction of justice charges; urging the adoption of a "national security" defense for potential White House defendants.

They are candid beyond any papers ever made public by a President. Even though the transcripts were edited to remove expletives, they still contain occasional profanities and harsh judgments on individuals. They also contain disclosures of a kind that are certain to inspire even stronger future controversy about Mr. Nixon's role.

The controversy over Mr. Nixon's compliance with the congressional subpoena also continues. Today the House Judiciary Committee will meet to give its formal response on whether its members find the President in compliance with their legal request for the production of 42 tapes and related materials—or whether they will initiate contempt proceedings in Congress.

Such a finding could become a key charge in the impeachment proceedings now under way.

The transcripts, even in their expurgated form, are certain to be talked about and read long after Mr. Nixon leaves the White House: the Government Printing Office is already planning to sell them at \$12.25 a set, and they will be the subject of countless other books and studies about the way the Nixon administration handled its Watergate crisis.

The conversations are laced with references to "laundering" money and cash payments, to "coded" phone conversations and burglaries and break-ins and even, in one instance, to a Mafia-type operation.

At one point in the celebrated March 21, 1973, meeting between the President and his then-counsel, John W. Dean III, Mr. Nixon responds to the question of raising \$1 million in "hush money" by saying:

"We could get that. On the money, if you need the money you could get that. You could get a million dollars. You could get it in cash. I know where it could be gotten. It is not easy, but it could be done. But the question is, Who would handle it? Any ideas on that?"

Dean had an idea—former Attorney General John N. Mitchell. The President agreed. "I would think so, too," he said.

In that same conversation, Dean had complained that the people at the White House were not "pros" at "this sort of thing. This is the sort of thing Mafia people can do. . . ."

"That's right," the President responded.

The conversation continued:
Dean: It is a tough thing to know how to do.
Mr. Nixon: Maybe it takes a gang to do that.

His release of his private conversations comes exactly a year to the day after he first reported in full to the public on the Watergate affair.

Now he is even more deeply engaged in fighting the most difficult political battle of his life.

Text of White House summary. Page A18
Transcript of March 21 meeting. Page A20