

March 21 and After: Mood

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By March 21, 1973, where the transcripts of presidential tapes printed in today's Washington Post begin, John W. Dean III was convinced, according to his own testimony elsewhere, that President Nixon "did not seem to understand the implications of what was going on" at the White House.

After meeting with President Nixon that day and speaking to White House chief of staff H. R. Haldeman and assistant for domestic affairs John D. Ehrlichman, Dean has testified that "it was quite clear that the cover-up as far as the White House was concerned was going to continue."

Less than a month after that meeting, President Nixon began referring to March 21, 1973, as the day he made major new findings in Watergate, the day he began his own personal investigation.

Since then, and as recently as Monday night, Mr. Nixon has repeatedly said that the tape of his conversation with Dean on March 21 would show his

lack of knowledge of or complicity in the Watergate scandal.

So the March 21 conversation has emerged as the centerpiece of the Watergate tape transcript released by the White House this week. In it are extensive discussions of how the cover-up was run from the White House, of the threats of blackmail being made by conspirator E. Howard Hunt Jr., and hints of what had apparently become a close relationship between the President and his 34-year-old aide.

"I worked on a theory of containment," Dean told Mr. Nixon.
"Sure," the President said.

Dean: To try to hold it right where it was.

Mr. Nixon: Right.

Dean, who told the President he had been "under pretty clear instructions," said, "There is no doubt that I was totally aware of what the bureau (the FBI) was doing at all times. I was totally aware of what the grand jury was doing. I knew what they were asked, and I had to."

Dean and Mr. Nixon kept coming back to the problem of blackmail, with

the President, after being told that Hunt "could sink (White House special counsel) Chuck Colson," asking, "Don't you think you have to handle Hunt's financial situation damn soon?" and reiterating, "It seems to me we have to keep the cap on the bottle that much, or we don't have any options."

Dean and Mr. Nixon talked about Anthony Ulasewicz, the former New York policeman who conducted private investigations for White House aides and was paid with funds kept by the President's personal attorney, Herbert W. Kalmbach.

The transcript, which denotes Dean as "D" and Mr. Nixon as "P" and Haldeman as "H," quotes Dean as referring to Kalmbach's maintaining "a man who I only know as Tony, who is the fellow who did the Chappaquiddick study."

"I know about that," Mr. Nixon said. At another point in the massive 1,308-page volume of presidential conversations, Mr. Nixon asks if that study can't be got out.

The Chappaquiddick study dealt with events surrounding the drowning

at the White House Darkens

of a young woman in a car driven by Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.). Ulasewicz was sent to investigate the 1969 incident for the White House.

The conversations printed in today's Post go from March 21 through April 8, a period in which the atmosphere at the White House was changing from one of confidence that Watergate would disappear as a problem to one of frantic activity to keep the matter under control, legally, politically and in a public relations sense.

Largely responsible for putting the White House on the defensive were the Senate confirmation hearings of L. Patrick Gray III as permanent FBI director and the charges of cover-up by Watergate defendant James W. McCord Jr.

On March 22, 1973, Sen. Robert C. Byrd (D-W.Va.), elicited from Gray a remark that Dean "probably lied" in a statement to FBI agents who were interrogating Colson the previous June 11. At the White House, as the tapes reflect, Dean was furious and Haldeman predicted that the remark

would receive banner headlines. It did.

"Well, let's talk about Gray," the President said in a taped conversation that day with Dean, Haldeman, Ehrlichman and John N. Mitchell. "The problem with him is I think he is a little bit stupid."

In Dean's view, as described at the Senate Watergate hearings, Ehrlichman and Haldeman felt on March 22 that the way to handle Watergate "now was for Mitchell to step forward and if Mr. Mitchell were to step forward we might not be confronted with the activities of those involved in the White House in the cover-up." But, though Mitchell attended the March 22 meeting, there is no indication of pressure applied to him, and, indeed, none is to be found in the transcripts made public until three weeks later.

With Gray's Senate testimony there were immediate demands that Dean appear before the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Instead of coming to work at the White House March 23—the day McCord made his charges—Dean was told

to go to Camp David, and here, as happens so frequently, the transcripts provide a glimpse but not a full explanation of matters that have become central in the conflicting versions of the scandal.

Mr. Nixon has repeatedly stated that he sent Dean to Camp David to make a full report on Watergate, while Dean has testified there was never any intention to have the real facts of Watergate disclosed. The matter was discussed March 22, as well as on other occasions.

On March 23, McCord's letter to Watergate Judge John J. Sirica was read in U.S. District Court, charging that higher-ups were involved in the scandal that money had been paid to keep the Watergate defendants silent and that offers of executive clemency had been made. From then on, the White House was on the defensive.

McCord was interrogated that weekend by members of the Senate Watergate staff, and charges he made against Dean, Jeb Magruder and others began finding their way into the press. Late

GUIDE, From A17

on March 25, an attorney for Dean telephoned The Washington Post, warning of a possible libel suit if damaging information were to be printed.

As the transcript for March 27 shows, the President and his aides considered whether he should make a television appearance, decided against it, and Mr. Nixon and press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler discussed coping with pressure from the press.

P. Yeah. My view is today, unless you've got something more to say, I would simply say I have nothing to add to what (unintelligible) I think that would be better, just get out there and act like your usually cocky self . . .

Z. I could—Two options: One would be to say that (unintelligible); the other would be to say the (unintelligible).

Mr. Nixon seemed furious at McCord: "Scot free and a hero," he complained.

As the meeting of March 27 progressed, Mr. Nixon, Haldeman and

Ehrlichman discussed the problems they faced in detail and saw assertions of "national security" as a means of keeping certain incidents from coming to light.

"Starting back in the days when I was counsel to the President," Ehrlichman said, "we were very concerned with our national security leaks and we undertook at that time a whole series of steps to try and determine the source of the leaks. Some of this involved national security taps duly and properly authorized and conducted . . ."

As pressure mounted, the White House took the extraordinary step of quietly sending Haldeman on March 28 to a regular meeting of the Wednesday Club, a group of congressmen whose views were generally sympathetic to Mr. Nixon. Haldeman spoke softly, told them Watergate was being blown out of proportion.

By April 8, the date of the last transcript included in today's installment, the Watergate crisis had begun to set the White House reeling.

John Dean had hired new lawyers

and they were telling the Watergate prosecutors that Dean was ready to come forward. Sen. Lowell Weicker (R-Conn.) had demanded the resignation of Haldeman. Patrick Gray, whose confirmation hearings were in recess, withdrew his name from nomination as FBI chief. On April 6, the Wall Street Journal released the results of a poll showing that great numbers of Americans believed the President knew of the Watergate cover-up. Charles Colson arranged to take his own lie detector test, and reported that he had passed.

Dean's talks with the prosecutors were the subject of the last transcript included in today's newspaper, as Mr. Nixon and Ehrlichman discussed having John Mitchell give advice to the young counsel.

"Mitchell has got to decide whether he's going to tell John Dean, 'Look here, I don't think you ought to say a word or you've got to go down and lie,' " he President said. "Well, John is not going to lie."