

The Day the President Severed

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For those deeply involved in the Watergate Affair, Saturday, April 14, 1973, was a day never to be forgotten.

As the transcripts of presidential conversations printed in today's Washington Post show, it was the day that President Nixon severed himself from John N. Mitchell, the man most closely associated with his rise to the presidency from a career that seemed to have been left in ashes 11 years earlier.

It was the day that Watergate conspirator Jeb Stuart Magruder met with the prosecutors, who had already been hardening their case against Mr. Nixon's closest associates through information supplied by White House counsel John W. Dean III. The prosecutors' late that evening were to request and get a meeting with Attorney General Richard G. Kleindienst to tell him they had, in effect, broken the coverup.

Two forces were readying for collision: those seeking to keep the facts of Watergate secret and those seeking to pry them open. Neither was left intact from that day on.

For six hours, from before nine in the morning until almost seven in the evening, the most powerful man in the western world met repeatedly with his closest associates, discussing the same Watergate details and strategy over and over again.

At 8:55 a.m., as the last transcript printed in yesterday's Washington Post shows, Mr. Nixon met in the Oval Office with his chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, and his assistant for domestic affairs, John J. Ehrlichman.

Several times references were made to bringing Mitchell down from New York immediately, and how to have Mitchell assume public responsibility for Watergate.

Finally, Haldeman summoned Mitchell to Washington by telephone and it was decided that Ehrlichman would be the one to break the news to the former Attorney General. The meeting would be too painful for the President.

"Let me put it this way. I can't watch (unintelligible)," Mr. Nixon said. "Mitchell — this is going to break him up."

That meeting between Mr. Nixon, Haldeman and Ehrlichman lasted until 11:31 a.m. Then, according to White House logs released elsewhere, the President broke from Watergate to spend the next hour with his chief foreign policy adviser, Henry Kissinger, and Kissinger's aide, Gen. Alexander Haig, who was later to replace Haldeman as Nixon's chief of staff.

While no transcript of the Kissinger conversation has been made public, it appears that Watergate crept in here and there or so later references by the President to what "Henry" had to say seem to indicate.

At 1:55 p.m., the President and Haldeman met again in the Oval Office. The session ended 18 minutes later when the President read a note that aide Stephen Bull handed him: Ehrlichman, who had by now completed his talk with Mitchell, "had some ideas he would like to pass along." There was a break until 2:24, when, once again, Mr. Nixon, Haldeman and Ehrlichman picked up their conference.

"All finished?" were the words Mr. Nixon used to open that meeting.

"Yes sir," Ehrlichman responded. "He an innocent man in his heart and in his mind and he does not intend to move off that position. He appreciated the message of the good feeling between you and him."

Ehrlichman related his conversation with Mitchell, and the President became angry.

Quoting from the transcript, in which Mr. Nixon is referred to as "P," Haldeman as "H," and Ehrlichman as "E," there was this exchange.

E. Well, let me tell you what Mitchell said. It was another gigging of the White House. He said, "You know in Bob's office (campaign aide Jeb S. Magruder), Magruder said that Haldeman had cooked this whole thing up over here at the White House and —

P. Had he said that?

E. Well that is what he said, and that he had been sort of —

P. Now wait a minute. Your conversation with Mitchell is the one where —

H. I've got my notes on it.

P. Where Mitchell (unintelligible) is one where — Mitchell does — its good you have the notes, too, but —

E. Mitchell's theory —

P. Whatever his theory is, let me say, one footnote — is that throwing off on the White House won't help him one damn bit.

Aside from Mitchell, other Watergate protagonists were dealt with again and again in these April 14 sessions, including then White House counsel Dean and Charles W. Colson, who had left his position as White

Himself From Mitchell

House special counsel the month before to go into a private law practice in Washington with an attorney named Shapiro.

"You don't think this would lead to an indictment of Colson, do you?" Mr. Nixon asked at one point.

"I don't know. Dean thinks everybody in the place is going to get indicted," Ehrlichman replied.

Haldeman interrupted: "And that list includes, in addition to Mitchell, Haldeman, Ehrlichman, Colson, Dean, Strachan, Kalmbach, Kalmbach's go-between, Kalmbach's source, LaRue, Mardian, O'Brien, Parkinson, Bittman, Hunt."

Hearing the names of these men, some of whom had been close to him for many years, the President spoke about clemency.

"It's a shame. There could be clemency in this case and at the proper time having in mind the extraordinary sentences of Magruder, etc., etc., but you know damn well it is ridiculous to talk about clemency. They all knew that. Colson knew that. I mean," the President said to Ehrlichman, "when you talked to Colson and he talked to me."

At several points during the day, the three men discussed plans to turn over to Attorney General Kleindienst a written White House statement of just what had occurred in Watergate. The statement was to be, purportedly, the result of an investigation by Ehrlichman begun at the request of the President in the closing days of March.

The transcripts printed today bear on whether Ehrlichman did actually conduct an investigation, a matter that

has become one of the many controversial issues as Watergate winds its way through the courts and conversations.

Twice in conversations during the day the President spoke out "separating" the political sabotage affairs of Donald H. Segretti from Watergate, saying he would like "to get the Segretti thing out."

Segretti's so-called "dirty tricks" were minor, the President and his men seemed convinced, and they apparently wanted that to be demonstrated.

Twenty days later, on May 4, 1973, Segretti was indicted in Florida—although the investigation had been moribund to the point that in March a Florida prosecutor notified Sen. Henry (Scoop) Jackson (D-Wash.), one of the dirty tricks victims, that the case was closed.

Also discussed is the question of whether indictments of high Nixon aides, such as Mitchell, might be used as a tactic to delay or otherwise impair the Senate Watergate Committee hearings, which were scheduled to open (and eventually did) in May.

"I think (Sen. Sam J.) Ervin's best bet is to suspend as soon as these indictments are announced. If he were smart, that's what he'd do."

"Well," Mr. Nixon said, "after they get through this—this kind of indictment—there isn't going to be that much gas in the Ervin Committee. I mean, they'll go ahead, but I mean they'll say well, now, what the hell."

At 8 p.m., April 14, adding a touch of heightening drama to events of that day, the White House Correspondents' dinner—the biggest White House press event each year—got under way at

the Washington Hilton Hotel, with more than 2,000 people present.

The Washington Post, which had learned a few days earlier that it was to be awarded a Pulitzer Prize for its Watergate investigation, had several tables reserved for executives, editors and reporters.

At the long head table sat Ronald Ziegler and members of the Cabinet. Haldeman and Ehrlichman, other White House staff, Attorney General Kleindienst, Watergate Judge John J. Sirica and numerous others who played prominent roles on both sides of the scandal were present.

Ziegler applauded lightly as Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein received an award for their role in uncovering Watergate. Shortly after that, the President and Mrs. Nixon entered. Mr. Nixon sat for a while, made a brief talk and left.

At 11 o'clock the party was just beginning for many members of the press. But by 11:02, the President and Haldeman had other things on their mind. A transcript presented in Thursday's newspaper, that of a telephone call between them, refers back to matters discussed seemingly endlessly all day.

It opened with the President ending the day as he stated it: "One thing the day as he stated it: "One thing I reflect a little on Magruder's stuff..."

Then, 20 minutes later, Mr. Nixon telephoned Ehrlichman. "I just wanted to see what your plans were for tomorrow," Mr. Nixon said, and they talked for 31 minutes, until shortly before midnight.