

Nixon Told Aides: 'I Sometimes Feel... I'd Like to Resign'

By Barry Sussman

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The presidential conversations printed in today's Washington Post, the last of the edited transcripts made public by President Nixon last week, begin with a telephone call from Mr. Nixon to his chief domestic adviser, John D. Ehrlichman.

It was April 17, 1973, and Ehrlichman was working on the brief address Mr. Nixon was to make that afternoon, saying that he had "begun intensive new inquiries" and was able to announce "major developments" in the Watergate case.

The transcripts end April 27, 1973, with a conversation in which a beleaguered President raised the possibility of resigning from office.

"Now this is personal," Mr. Nixon told Assistant Attorney General Henry E. Petersen and White House press secretary Ronald Ziegler that day. "I sometimes feel like I'd like to resign. Let Agnew be President for a while. He'd love it."

Throughout the edited transcripts runs a sense of the terrible pressure that elicited such a remark, much of it coming from the Watergate prosecutors who had been criticized sharply by Judge John J. Sirica for their handling of the original Watergate trial in January.

White House chief of staff H. R. (Bob) Haldeman told Mr. Nixon that the prosecutors, Earl J. Silbert, Seymour Glanzer and Donald Campbell, were running roughshod over Gordon Strachan, an aide to Haldeman. "You know, Strachan made that mistake on the 350; Haldeman said in an apparent reference to \$350,000 used to make secret payments to the Watergate defendants.

"He called Silbert the next day and said, 'I would like to correct that. I made a mistake.' They said, 'Fine, come up in the morning and we'll straighten it out.'

"He went up Monday morning, and they laughed at him and said we're not going to put you before the grand jury. See, that's when they kicked him around, yesterday morning. Then today when he went in they said, 'We will not let you correct your statement on the 350, we've got you on a perjury count.'"

Later, the President complained about the prosecutors to William Rogers, who was then Secretary of State.

"They'll pound on that," Mr. Nixon said of the incident in which Acting FBI Director L. Patrick Gray destroyed documents given him by Ehrlichman and White House counsel John W. Dean III. "They're trying like hell to just frighten people to death. They're going to send 'em to jail and so forth. Strachan—they're trying to break him."

As Mr. Nixon's book "Six Crises" shows, the President consulted with Rogers at crucial moments throughout his political career. In their conversation of April 17, 1973, included in today's newspaper, it is revealed that Mr. Nixon had given Rogers a copy of possible charges that could be lodged against Ehrlichman, originally given to Mr. Nixon by Petersen.

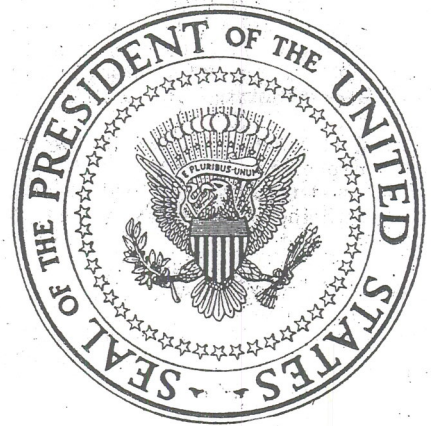
Rogers, a leading Washington attorney for many years and Attorney General under President Eisenhower, said it appeared to be a weak case, but recommended that Ehrlichman and Haldeman resign anyway. Rogers had recommended that the two men retain John J. Wilson as counsel, and at one point Ehrlichman and Haldeman enter

President: Magruder is not naming Haldeman and Ehrlichman though. That is the problem, is it?

Petersen: Yes he does—but not in the firsthand sense.

President: Only by hearsay—

and describe to Rogers and Mr. Nixon Wilson's dislike for the prosecutors and for Henry Petersen as well.



"He knows Petersen. He knows Glanzer. He knows all these people and he despises them," Ehrlichman said.

Petersen "probably foxed" Wilson, Mr. Nixon suggested.

Later, in one of two meetings between Mr. Nixon and Wilson and his law partner, Frank Strickler, Wilson referred to Haldeman and Ehrlichman as two "fine Americans" and called Glanzer "a zealot."

Pressures from the prosecutors on Mr. Nixon were mounting in another direction as well. On April 17, 1973, Petersen received from Silbert a memorandum describing the break-in by the White House "plumbers" at the office of Dr. Lewis Fielding, Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist.

Mr. Nixon told Petersen that Ellsberg was a national security matter, to "stay out of that." But upon appeal from Attorney General Richard G. Kleindienst on April 25, 1973, the President agreed to have testimony on the break-in forwarded to the Ellsberg trial judge, W. Matthew Byrne. By April 27, FBI agents were interrogat-

ing Ehrlichman, the plumbers' supervisor, about the break-in.

There were other problems, too.

On April 17, Martha Mitchell telephoned United Press International reporter Helen Thomas, criticized Mr. Nixon and said her husband was being made a fall guy. On April 20, former Attorney General John N. Mitchell, in his first admission of any kind in the Watergate scandal, was quoted in the New York Times as having said that the matter of bugging the Democrats had come up for his approval but that he had rejected it.

The next day, Mr. Nixon met with members of the Cabinet, told them that "we've had our Cambodias before" and promised to get to the bottom of the scandal. According to some reports at the time, Mr. Nixon berated Kleindienst over grand jury minutes that were appearing every day in the Jack Anderson news column, charging that the prosecutors were leaking the grand jury transcripts.

On April 22, the President, in Key

wish him a happy Easter—"a stroking call," Dean later called it. Attending church services that day, Mr. Nixon heard a sermon in which the congregation was urged to "admit past mistakes," to "fish or cut bait." Mr. Nixon spent the rest of the day with his two close friends and financiers of his San Clemente estate, Bebe Rebozo and Robert Abplanalp.

On nationwide television that Sunday morning, Sen. Edward W. Brooke (R-Mass.), said that Mr. Nixon "had to know" of the bugging in advance. A Gallup poll released the same day stated that 4 of every Americans felt the same way, despite the fact that not a single person had charged the President with knowledge of the Watergate spying before the arrests of June 17, 1972.

On April 25, Vice President Agnew told a group of students that he would resign "as a matter of conscience" if the Watergate scandal, which had not touched him, made him feel unable to continue in office.

Consumer advocate Ralph Nader called on Mr. Nixon to resign, and Mitchell, the administration's personification of law and order, was in the midst of testifying before grand juries in New York, Washington, D.C., and Florida on three successive days.

On the 26th of April, Sen. Barry Goldwater claimed that he had been bugged in 1964, a statement that Mr. Nixon and his aides had wanted the senator to make a month earlier, as one of the first of the published transcripts disclosed.

Jeb Stuart Magruder, the former

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White House aide to Haldeman and No. 2 re-election campaign official in 1972, resigned his Commerce Department position after having testified to his guilt in the Watergate conspiracy. Magruder then went back to work for the President's Inaugural ommittee, which was headed by J. Willard Marriott, Mr. Nixon's close friend.

Marriott said that although the inaugural had been held Jan. 20, there was still work to be done and Magruder was entitled to a job.

Also rehired was Sally Harmony, secretary to conspirator G. Gordon Liddy. Both Magruder and Harmony, of course, had not yet testified before the Senate Watergate Committee, which began its hearings in May.

On April 27, Mr. Nixon took Haldeman and Ehrlichman with him to fly over flood areas in Mississippi. In Jackson, Sen. John C. Stennis (D-Miss.) told the President to "tough it out."

That night, as scandal stories continued relentlessly, a small crowd waited at the front entrance of The Washington Post for the paper's first editions. Among them was Watergate conspirator James W. McCord.

In his newspaper, McCord found a story saying that L. Patrick Gray had resigned, shamed by reports that he had destroyed the documents given him by Dean and Ehrlichman. There was another article saying that Judge Byrne had announced in open court in Los Angeles the fact that agents of the White House had broken into Dr. Fielding's office in 1971.

All this was prelude to the events of April 30, when Mr. Nixon went on national television to announce the resignations of Haldeman, Ehrlichman, Kleindienst, and the firing of Dean.

The President said he was taking full responsibility for Watergate, but pointed out that in 1972 campaign, unlike earlier drives, he was too busy with affairs of state to be active politi-

cally. "There can be no whitewash at the White House," Mr. Nixon told the American people.

Afterward, one reporter wrote, "Mr. Nixon showed his emotions . . . by walking unexpectedly into the White House press room. Appearing gray and drawn, he said in a low voice:

"We've had our differences in the past, and just continue to give me hell when you think I'm wrong. I hope I'm worthy of your trust."

The transcript of an earlier conversation, one on April 15, 1973, suggests that this "emotional" appearance in the press room may not have been as spontaneous as it appeared.

The President was recounting to Haldeman how Kleindienst had urged him to "make a Checkers speech at 9 o'clock at night . . . I said, 'Now, Dick, I am not going to. I am not going to be elevated if that way. If it's going to be elevated, let the press elevate it. I will go out and say it before the press, the press room, you know.'"

April 17, 1973. President Nixon: 'I can report today there have been major

developments in the case . . .'

