

Tapes at Watergate Trial Show Origins Of Nixon Version of Incriminating Talk

11-22-74

By CAROL H. FALK

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WASHINGTON—Newly disclosed Watergate tape recordings show the origins of the cover story Richard Nixon desperately fashioned to explain an incriminating presidential conversation.

Once Mr. Nixon settled on the version he would give of the March 21, 1973, discussion with his counsel John Dean, the tapes show, he was left with one nagging worry: that Dean himself might have taped the conversation and thus could have "a real bomb" to offer the prosecutors.

The tapes, played yesterday at the cover-up trial of five former Nixon aides, present an increasingly panicky President, seeking reassurance from his chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, and his top domestic adviser, John Ehrlichman. Both aides are defendants in the current trial.

On April 25, 1973, Mr. Ehrlichman warned prophetically that "you could get a resolution of impeachment" if Dean were "totally out of control and if matters aren't handled adroitly."

Cover Story Offered

Then Messrs. Nixon, Haldeman and Ehrlichman began worrying about how to keep the President from being accused of a crime. Mr. Nixon said he knew that in the March 21 conversation "the question was raised of blackmail." He also recalled asking if it would cost a million dollars. Trying out his story, Mr. Nixon recounted: "And I said facetiously, 'Well, I guess we can get a million dollars.' It was then that we started my whole investigation. Now, I don't know, how does that one sound to you?"

"Well, that sounds tough," replied Mr. Ehrlichman, "yet it's manageable."

Later in the afternoon of April 25 Mr. Haldeman reported back to the President after listening to the tape of the March 21 conversation. His memory refreshed, Mr. Nixon mused: "I said a million dollars. With a million dollars (unintelligible) clemency. You couldn't do it till after the '74 elections. That's an incriminating thing."

Mr. Haldeman offered a less damaging interpretation: that Mr. Nixon had been conducting an investigation and was merely drawing Dean out. "It isn't a good story, best we can . . ." commented Mr. Nixon.

But Mr. Nixon continued to worry about what he had said: "(unintelligible) How do we deliver the money? Clemency not before '74. That's the vulnerable point." He also noted that he had said, "At least we ought

to take care of that, didn't I say that though?"

"Yeah," said Mr. Haldeman, "but that was to lead him on into the question of how to handle the money."

From the time John Dean began testifying publicly about the March 21 conversation up through the release of a transcript of it last spring, Messrs. Nixon and Haldeman maintained that the President had simply been playing "devil's advocate" and that, while he had said hush money could be raised, he had added, "It would be wrong."

Actually, the April 25 tape shows that Mr. Nixon himself realized that his rejection didn't apply to hush money: "I said, 'That's wrong,' didn't I? Oh, wrong on clemency."

"No, you said getting the money was wrong," insisted Mr. Haldeman, adding "You said that, that approach would be wrong. . . ."

The story agreed upon, Mr. Nixon said to Mr. Haldeman: "Let me say it's got to be you, Ehrlichman and I have got to put the wagons up around the President on this particular conversation. I just wonder if the son-of-a-bitch had a recorder on him."

Nixon Unsure of Dean

Although the unflappable Mr. Haldeman replied, "It's almost inconceivable that the guy would try that," Mr. Nixon was sufficiently concerned to call Mr. Haldeman back that evening and ask if there was any way to find out if Dean had recorded the meeting. If it was just Dean's word, based

on memory or notes, against the President's, Mr. Nixon commented, "On that we'll destroy him."

Turning philosophical the President remarked that, while things would probably get rough, "We'll survive and some people you'll even find (unintelligible) in Mississippi you'll find a half a dozen people that will be for the President." He added: "I think there's still a hell of a lot of people out there and from what I've seen, they're—you know, they, they want to believe."