

Nixon Got Details Earlier, Tape Shows

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Four days before he has said he was first told of the Watergate cover-up, President Nixon was given a detailed report on the criminal "vulnerabilites" of his top aides by then White House counsel John W. Dean III.

Mr. Nixon told Dean to try to "cut her off at the pass" and keep the information from the Senate Watergate committee.

According to a previously undisclosed White House tape recording played yesterday at the cover-up trial in federal court here, Mr. Nixon instructed Dean on

March 17, 1973, to work up a "self-serving" statement blaming the 1972 Watergate bugging and break-in on excessive zeal by G. Gordon Liddy and the six other original Watergate defendants.

"I think what you've got to do, to the extent that you can, John, is cut her off at the pass," Mr. Nixon told Dean. "And you cut off at the pass. Liddy and his bunch just did this as part of their job."

Dean picked up the idea right away. "They were out on a lark," he suggested in turn. "They went beyond any assignment they ever had."

Mr. Nixon's resignation this summer was prompted by disclosure of an earlier conversation in which he personally ordered an effort to block the Watergate investigation. But he has always publicly insisted that it was not until March 21, 1973—when Dean warned him of a "cancer" growing on the presidency—that he began to suspect that his aides and campaign advisers might really have been involved in the break-in and the ensuing cover-up.

Through all the investigations that followed, Dean said he felt sure he had warned Mr. Nixon before

that. The excerpts of the March 17 tape played yesterday with Dean on the witness stand, listening intently along with everyone else in the courtroom, bore him out.

At one point during a meeting in the Oval Office that day, the recording showed, the President started reciting what his young counsel had just been telling him about the Watergate scandal and the possible involvement of aides such as former Attorney General John N. Mitchell, White House Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman, and White

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House special counsel Charles W. Colson. There was also some discussion of the involvement of Dwight Chapin, Mr. Nixon's appointments secretary in the so-called "dirty tricks" campaign by political saboteur Donald H. Segretti.

Mr. Nixon said he was summing up where "this thing leads, I mean in terms of vulnerabilities and so forth."

Nixon: It's your view the vulnerables are basically Mitchell, Colson, Haldeman indirectly—possibly directly, and, of course, the second level is, as far as the White House is concerned, Chapin.

Dean: I'd say Dean to a degree.

Mr. Nixon voiced surprise. He was apparently thinking of possible involvement in the campaign spywork and programming that led to the break-in at Democratic National Committee headquarters here on June 17, 1972, rather than the cover-up that followed.

"You? Why?" he asked Dean, who is serving a 1-to-4-year prison sentence for trying to obstruct the government's original investigation.

Dean: Well, because I've been all over this thing like a blanket.

Nixon: I know, I know, but you know all about it, but you didn't, you were in it after the deed was done.

Dean: That's correct. I have no foreknowledge.

Nixon: Here's the whole point, here's the whole point. My point is that your problem is, you—you have no problem. All the others that have participated in the goddam thing, and therefore are potentially subject to criminal liability. You're not. That's the difference.

Dean agreed. The President seemed to be preoccupied that day not so much with possible obstruction of justice, but with those who might be blamed in some way for the Watergate bugging.

According to Watergate prosecutors, Mitchell approved a \$25,000 espionage plan that included the bugging at a meeting in Key Biscayne, Fla., on March 30, 1972. Colson had allegedly pressed for a decision on the secret operation. After

the first bug was installed at the DNC headquarters in late May, Haldeman's deputy, Gordon Strachan, and perhaps Haldeman himself, are believed to have seen the initial results of the tap. At the March 17, 1973, meeting Dean told the President of the preliminary discussions a year before about setting up an intelligence operation, but said he thought the plans had been dropped.

Nixon: . . . but you didn't hear any discussions of bugging did you, in that, your meetings? Or did you?

Dean: Yeah, I did. That's what, ah, distressed me quite a bit.

Nixon: Who raised it? Liddy?

Dean: That's right.

With hearings of the Senate Watergate committee coming up, Mr. Nixon suggested that the White House might still be able to start off "in good posture" if Dean could work up a statement saying simply that a legal intelligence operation had been planned.

" . . . you won't need to say in your statement the bugging," the President told his counsel.

Dean went on to say that he met with Liddy two days after the burglary squad was arrested and was assured that nobody at the White House knew they were going into the DNC headquarters. "With one exception, and it was a lower-level person."

Mr. Nixon did not have to be told who that might have been. "Strachan," the President said before Dean could supply the name.

"Strachan," Dean agreed. " . . . I don't really know if he—how much he knew, and I said (to Liddy) 'Well, why in the hell did this happen?' He said, 'Magruder pushed me without mercy to go in there. Magruder said I had to go in there.'"

Mr. Nixon asked, "Who pushed Magruder? Colson?"

Dean said he wasn't sure.

"Think Haldeman pushed him?" the President continued. "I can't think Haldeman pushed Magruder . . . maybe Chapin did."

Dean answered: "No, I think Strachan did. Because Strachan just had it on his tickler (file); he was supposed to be gathering intelligence and talking to Jeb and saying what, where is it

and why isn't it coming in? You haven't produced it."

The President could well visualize how it might all come out publicly, perhaps starting with disclosures by someone like the 1972 Nixon campaign treasurer, Hugh Sloan, who had questioned the money provided to Liddy.

"Sloan starts pissing on Magruder and then Magruder starts pissing on, on, who? Even Haldeman," Mr. Nixon suggested. "I think what you've got to do, to the extent that you can, John, is cut her off at the pass."

Before his resignation, Mr. Nixon had made public only the final portion of the March 17, 1973, conversation, in which Dean told the President that it might not be long before the White House role in the 1971 burglary at the offices of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist would be uncovered. All the other tape segments were kept secret.

The President seemed optimistic about keeping a lid on the scandal at the March 17 meeting. But Dean testified yesterday that fresh problems arose almost immediately.

On Monday, March 19, 1973, he said, a lawyer for the Nixon re-election committee, Paul O'Brien, came into Dean's office at the Executive Office Building with an ominous report.

Watergate burglar E. Howard Hunt was about to be sentenced by U.S. District Court Judge John J. Sirica on Friday, March 23. Now, Dean said, "Hunt had sent a message to me directly through O'Brien."

A former CIA agent, Hunt, the jurors were told, was demanding \$70,000 for "support" and \$60,000 in attorneys fees by Thursday, March 22.

Dean said O'Brien told him Hunt had warned: "If I don't get what I asked for, I'll have to reconsider my options and I'll have some things to say about the seamy things I did for John Ehrlichman."

Then the No. 2 aide at the White House, Ehrlichman had been in overall charge of the White House "plumbers" unit that had conducted the Ellsberg burglary with Hunt and Liddy as the field commanders. Dean said he told Ehrlichman of Hunt's threat on March 20.