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A Credibility Problem for Scott

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 23 —

President Nixon had a credibility problem. Hugh Scott, the Senate Republican leader, publicly defended President Nixon. Now Hugh Scott may have a

News Analysis

credibility problem. What happened to Senator Scott between Sunday and today is a measure of the deep skepticism that has infected much of Watergate-era Washington and, perhaps, the nation.

Senator Scott declared Sunday in a nationally televised interview that he had seen White House material disproving some of the major Watergate charges against the President. The Senator's intentions, a spokesman said today, were good—to try to prod Mr. Nixon into making public his own best defense.

The Senator declined to say what the material was or which accusations it cleared up, and he lamented the reluctance of the White House to make it public.

Documents Referred to

Since then, Mr. Scott's associates have let it be known that the Senator was referring to documents that appeared to refute the damaging allegation by John W. Dean 3d, the former White House legal counsel, that Mr. Nixon was aware of the Watergate cover-up before last March 21, when the President said he had first learned of it.

Yesterday, in seeming support of the Senator, Vice President Ford said at a news conference that he too had been assured — in his case, by Mr. Nixon — that there was evidence to disprove Mr. Dean's explosive, sworn testimony to the Senate Watergate committee six months ago. The President offered to show him the material, Mr. Ford said, but he was uncertain whether he should read it and so far had not had time to do so.

The clear suggestion was that the White House had given the Watergate special prosecutor, Leon Jaworski, material to discredit Mr. Dean's testimony.

Senator Voices Disbelief

Mr. Jaworski's spokesman replied with a customary "no comment." But new accounts, citing unidentified "sources familiar with" Mr. Jaworski's investigation, noted that the prosecutor had made no move to seek an indictment against Mr. Dean for perjury.

Moreover, some of Senator Scott's colleagues openly scoffed at the suggestion that the White House would withhold from a doubting public material that could erase the doubts.

"Do that expect people to believe what there is evidence floating around that would clear

the President — and he hasn't released it yet?" asked Senator Fran E. Moss, Democrat of Utah.

And even one of Senator Scott's aides said privately that he was fearful the Senator may have gone too far.

But Mr. Scott, asked again about the matter this morning, declared:

"What I said is the truth and what is attributed to the faceless source is false. I saw what I saw and I am what I am and I stand on what I said."

He noted pointedly that if he were Mr. Jaworski he would "feel there is enough evidence" to indict Mr. Dean on several perjury counts.

This afternoon, Mr. Jaworski in effect gave his answer in court, in a legal brief making clear that Mr. Dean would be a principal witness in the forthcoming trial of Dwight L. Chapin, the President's former appointments secretary, on four counts of perjury stemming from the Watergate grand jury investigation.

As a bemused Government investigator put it, "You don't use Dean as a witness in any trials if you're planning to slap a perjury charge on him."

Scott Aide Cites Meetings

Robert E. Hetherington, Senator Scott's press secretary, said today that the Senator's statements had been based not on any new material provided to him but on a series of meetings, dating back to September, at which White House officials had let him see parts of various documents.

At least one of the documents was a partial transcript of a

taped conversation between the President and Mr. Dean, "laundered" to remove extraneous statements and Mr. Nixon's sometimes earthy language.

The White House had suggested to members of Congress late last year that such transcripts would be made public to answer Mr. Nixon's critics and reassure the public of the President's innocence of any wrongdoing. More recently, however, the White House has maintained—as Mr. Ford did yesterday—that it would be "improper" to make the material public.

But Mr. Jaworski said yesterday, through a spokesman, that while he was not free to disclose White House evidence, the White House was under no such restriction.

Scott's Credibility

Thus, Mr. Scott's credibility in this instance seemed to depend on a disclosure by the White House, whose credibility the Senator was attempting to restore. Without either the White House transcripts or the Watergate tapes themselves, which now are in Mr. Jaworski's hands, there was no way to be certain if Mr. Scott had won access to significant information or had been made the victim of a White House credibility campaign.

"If he has been lied to here," Mr. Hetherington said of the Senator, "then everybody and his brother has been lied to because this information comes from the highest source short of the President himself."

The difficulty with that was that Mr. Nixon's credibility was, by nearly any current measure, something of an endangered species.