

How Dean, Nixon and Haldeman Recall March 21 in Oval Office

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WASHINGTON, March 10 — By last March 21, the Watergate cover-up was coming unhinged.

Two days before, John W. Dean 3d, President Nixon's counsel, had learned of demands for more money from E. Howard Hunt Jr., who was then in jail because of the Watergate burglary.

Already, Mr. Hunt's wife and attorney had received more than \$300,000 from a secret White House fund. Now, Mr. Hunt was demanding \$122,000 more and had threatened, Mr. Dean later said, to "have a lot of seamy things to say about what he had done" for the White House if he did not get the money.

At 10 A.M. on the 21st, Mr. Dean went into Mr. Nixon's Oval Office, determined, he later testified, to tell Mr. Nixon all he knew about the Watergate burglary and the cover-up.

The main dispute about that meeting involves whether Mr. Nixon said that it would be "wrong" to pay hush money to Mr. Hunt. Mr. Nixon contends now that he said it indirectly. H. R. Haldeman, then White House chief of staff, says that the President had said it directly and specifically.

Mr. Dean insists that the President did not say it at all.

Mr. Nixon and Mr. Haldeman have heard the tape of the meeting. So has a Watergate grand jury. Mr. Dean has not.

President's Future

The dispute is critical to the Watergate case now before the courts and, perhaps, to the President's future.

The grand jury in handing up indictments cited the meeting as one of the overt acts of a conspiracy to obstruct justice. Mr. Haldeman was charged last week with perjury for having allegedly lied when he said that Mr. Nixon had termed hush payments "wrong." And Mr. Dean, in the months since his testimony last year before the Senate Watergate committee, has changed his story about when the conversation about the hush money occurred.

What follows are the reports of the meeting given by Mr. Dean and Mr. Haldeman to the Watergate committee and by Mr. Nixon in his public statements:

Dean's Version

Mr. Dean told the Watergate committee that eight days before the March 21 meeting, he had told Mr. Nixon about demands for money by the Watergate defendants.

Mr. Dean said that he had had the following discussion with the President:

"I told the President about the fact that there were money demands being made by the seven convicted defendants, and that the sentencing of these individuals was not far off. It was during this conversation that Haldeman came into the office. After his brief in-

terruption by Haldeman's coming in, but while he [Haldeman] was still there, I told the President about the fact that there was no money to pay these individuals to meet their demands.

"He asked me how much it would cost. I told him that I could only make an estimate that it might be as high as \$1-million or more. He told me that that was no problem, and he also looked over at Haldeman and repeated the same statement."

'To the Contrary'

The conversation, according to Mr. Dean, turned to the question of clemency, and, in addition to Mr. Hunt's operation, the roles played by John D. Ehrlichman, then the President's domestic adviser, and Charles W. Colson, special White House counsel, were discussed.

"The President then referred to the fact that Hunt had been promised executive clemency," Mr. Dean related. "He said that he had discussed this matter with Ehrlichman and, contrary to instructions that Ehrlichman had given Colson not to talk to the President about it, that Colson had also discussed it with him later. He expressed some annoyance at the fact that Colson had also discussed this matter with him."

Later, Samuel Dash, the Watergate committee's chief counsel, asked Mr. Dean, "Now, do you recall the President ever telling you that it was wrong to pay this \$1-million?"

Mr. Dean replied, "To the

contrary. He said it would be no problem to raise the \$1-million."

Mr. Dean was also asked whether the President had vetoed the idea of executive clemency. Mr. Dean said that Mr. Nixon had not specifically done so.

Because the timing of the conversation about the \$1-million had been challenged by Mr. Nixon, his lawyers and Mr. Haldeman, Mr. Dean was questioned at length about whether he was certain it took place on the 13th and not the 21st.

Once, under questioning from Mr. Dash, Mr. Dean stated pointedly, "I am very clear on the fact that it occurred on the 13th, because the meeting on the 21st was a totally different range of topics than the way this rather casually came up on the 13th."

Now, however, Mr. Dean has changed his mind, according to official sources. These sources said Mr. Dean had told committee investigators and the grand jury that he was mistaken in his public testimony, that he had confused the two meetings and that what he had said took place on March 13 actually transpired on March 21.

Haldeman's Version

Mr. Haldeman testified that he attended only the last 40 minutes of Mr. Dean's two-hour meeting with Mr. Nixon and that the statement that the hush money was wrong had not not been made while he was in the room.

However, Mr. Haldeman said that in April, 1973, Mr. Nixon had asked him to listen to the tape of the entire meeting and that he had done so. He said that he had a clear recollection of what was said on the tape by Mr. Dean and Mr. Nixon.

Mr. Haldeman's testimony that he was not in the room when the possibilities of paying \$1-million to the defendants has raised conflicts, of course, with Mr. Dean's statement that Mr. Nixon turned to Mr. Haldeman and repeated that it would be "no problem" to raise the money.

Mr. Haldeman acknowledged that Mr. Dean had reported on "a current Hunt blackmail threat" to tell "seamy" things about the administration if he were not paid more money.

Mr. Haldeman went on to relate the following conversation that he said he had heard on the tape:

"The President pursued this in considerable detail, obviously trying to smoke out what was really going on. He led Dean on regarding the process and what he would recommend doing. He asked such things as, 'Well, this is the thing you would recommend? We ought to do this? Is this right?' and he asked where the money would come from, how it would be delivered and so on.

"He asked how much would be involved over the years and Dean said, 'probably \$1-million, but the problem is that it is hard to raise.'

'We Can Do That'

"The President said, 'there is no problem in raising \$1-million, we can do that, but it would be wrong.'

Later, Senator Howard H. Baker Jr. of Tennessee, the committee's ranking Republican, asked Mr. Haldeman if he were certain that Mr. Nixon had said that hush payments would be "wrong." The following exchange occurred:

Mr. Haldeman: I am absolutely positive that the tapes . . .

Mr. Baker: "Did you hear it with your own ears?"

Mr. Haldeman: "With my own ears, yes."

On the matter of granting clemency, Mr. Haldeman testified that Mr. Dean had brought up the question and that "The President confirmed that he could not offer clemency and Dean agreed."

Mr. Haldeman added, "There

was no discussion while I was in the room—nor do I recall any discussion on the tape—on the question of clemency in the context of the President saying that he had discussed this with Ehrlichman and with Colson. The only mention of clemency was Dean's report that Colson had discussed clemency with Hunt and the President's statement that he could not offer clemency and Dean's agreement."

Nixon's Version

Last August 22, at his first news conference since the Dean and Haldeman testimony, Mr. Nixon was asked about "raising funds for the Watergate defendants."

Mr. Nixon recalled "the March 21 meeting with Mr. Dean, saying that Mr. Dean had brought up the Hunt demand "for attorney fees and other support" and then declaring:

"My reaction very briefly was this: I said as you look at this, I said isn't it quite obvious first, that if it is going to have any chance to succeed, that these individuals aren't going to sit there in jail for four years, they're going to have clemency, isn't that correct?"

"He said, 'Yes.'"

"I said we can't give clemency."

He agreed.

"Then I went on to another point. The second point is that isn't it also quite obvious, as far as this is concerned, that while we could raise the money—and he indicated in answer to my question that it would probably take \$1-million over four years to take care of this defendant and others in this kind of a basis—the problem was, how do you get the money to them. And so, how do you get around the problem of clemency because they're not going to stay in jail simply because their families are being taken care of.

"And so that was why I concluded, as Mr. Haldeman recalls, perhaps, and did testify very effectively, when I said, 'John, it's wrong, it won't work, we can't give clemency and we've got to get this story out.'"
(L. N. I. R.)

In his news conference last Wednesday night, Mr. Nixon said once more that he had maintained that the matter of payments to defendants was "linked to clemency." He continued:

"I then said that to pay clemency was wrong. In fact, I think I can quote it directly. I said, 'It is wrong, that's for sure.' Mr. Haldeman was present when I said that. Mr. Dean was present. Both agreed with my conviction.

'Different Interpretations'

"Now, when individuals read the entire transcript of the 21st meeting or hear the entire tape where we discussed all these options, they can reach different interpretations. But I also know what I meant, and I know, also, what I did.

"I meant that the whole transaction was wrong, the transaction for the purpose of keeping this whole matter covered up."

Thus, Mr. Nixon did not say, as Mr. Haldeman did, that the President had stated directly that hush money was wrong. Also Mr. Haldeman said that he had heard the statement on hush money on the tape that was made while he was out of the room. Mr. Nixon and Mr. Dean said, however, that Mr. Haldeman was in the room when the matter was discussed.