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PRESIDENT NIXON AND JOHN DEAN
P. said . . . , D. said . . .

The Vital Conversation

Washington

These are excerpts from the edited transcripts of the March 21, 1973, meeting between President Nixon, John Dean and H. R. Haldeman. Mr. Nixon is designated as P, Dean as D and Haldeman as H.

D. Let me give you my overall first.

P. In other words, your judgment as to where it stands, and where we will go.

D. I think that there is no doubt about the seriousness of the problem we've got. We have a cancer within, close to the presidency, that is growing. It is growing daily. It's compounded, growing geometrically now, because it compounds itself. That will be clear if I, you know, explain some of the details of why it is. Basically, it is because (1) we are being blackmailed; (2) people are going to start perjuring themselves very quickly that have not had to perjure themselves to protect other people in the line. And there is no assurance

P. That that won't bust?

D. That that won't bust . . .

D. . . . Here is what is happening right now. What sort of brings matters to the (unintelligible). One, this is going to be a continual blackmail operation by Hunt and Liddy and the Cubans. No doubt about it. And McCord, who is another one involved. McCord has asked for nothing. . . . And as you know Colson has talked indirectly to Hunt about commutation. All of these things are bad, in that they are problems, they are promises, they are commitments. They are the very sort of thing that the Senate is going to be looking most for. I don't think they can find them, frankly.

P. Pretty hard.

D. Pretty hard. Damn hard. It's all cash.

P. Pretty hard I mean as far as the witnesses are concerned.

D. All right, now, the blackmail is continuing. Hunt called one of the lawyers from the re-election committee on last Friday to leave it with him over the weekend. The guy came in to see me to give a message directly to me. From Hunt to me . . . Hunt now is demanding another \$72,000 for his own personal expenses; another

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\$50,000 to pay attorneys fees; \$120,000 . . . He said, "I am going to be sentenced on Friday, and I've got to get my financial affairs in order."

. . . Hunt has now made a direct threat against Ehrlichman. As a result of this, this is his blackmail. He said, "I will bring John Ehrlichman down to his knees and put him in jail. I have done enough seamy things for he and Krogh, they'll never survive it.

P. Was he talking about Ellsberg?

D. Ellsberg, and apparently some other things. I don't know the full extent of it.

P. I don't know about anything else.

D. Well, first of all, there is the problem of the continued blackmail which will not only go on now, but it will go on while these people are in prison, and it will compound the obstruction of justice situation. It will cost money. It is dangerous. People around here are not pros at this sort of thing. This is the sort of thing Mafia people can do: washing money, getting clean money, and things like that. We just don't know about those things, because we are not criminals and not used to dealing in that business.

P. That's right.

D. It is a tough thing to know how to do.

P. Maybe it takes a gang to do that.

D. That's right. There is a real problem as to whether we could even do it. Plus there is a real problem in raising money. Mitchell has been working on raising some money. He is one of the ones with the most to lose. But there is no denying the fact that the White House, in Ehrlichman, Haldeman and Dean are involved in some of the early money decisions.

P. How much money do you need?

D. I would say these people are going to cost a million dollars over the next two years.

P. We could get that. On the money, if you need the money you could get that. You could get a million dollars. You could get it in cash. I know where it could be gotten. It is not easy, but it could be done. But the question is who the hell would handle it? Any ideas on that?

D. That's right. Well, I think that is something that Mitchell ought to be charged with.

P. I would think so too.

D. Let me continue a little bit right here now. When I say this is a growing cancer, I say it for reasons like this. Bud Krogh, in his testimony before the grand jury, was forced to perjure himself . . .

P. What did he perjure himself on, John?

D. Did he know the Cubans. He did.

P. He said he didn't?

D. That is right. They didn't press him hard.

P. He might be able to — I am just trying to think. Perjury is an awful hard rap to prove. If he could just say that I — well, go ahead.

D. Well, so that is one perjury. Mitchell and Magruder are potential perjurers. There is always the possibility of any one of these individuals blowing. Hunt, Liddy, Liddy is in jail right now, serving his time and having a good time right now. I think Liddy in his own bizarre way the strongest of all of them. So there is that possibility.

P. Your major guy to keep under control is Hunt?

D. That is right.

P. I think. Does he know a lot?

D. He knows so much. He could sink Chuck Colson . . .

P. Just looking at the immediate problem, don't you think you have to handle Hunt's financial situation damn soon?

D. I think that is — I talked with Mitchell about that last night and

P. It seems to me we have to keep the cap on the bottle that much, or we don't have any options.

D. I am coming down to what I really think, is that Bob and John and John Mitchell and I can sit down and spend a day, or however long, to figure out one, how this can be carved away from you, so that it does not damage you or the presidency. It just can't! You are not involved in it and it is something you shouldn't

P. That is true!

D. I know, sir. I can just tell from our conversation that these are things that you have no knowledge of.

P. You certainly can! Buggings, etc.

P. I know you have a problem here. You have the problem with Hunt and his clemency.

D. That's right. And you are going to have a clemency problem with the others. They all are going to expect to be out and that may put you in a position that is just untenable at some point. You know, the Watergate Hearings just over, Hunt now demanding clemency or he is going to blow. And politically, it's impossible for you to do it. You know, after everybody —

P. That's right!

D. I am not sure that you will ever be able to deliver on the clemency. It may be just too hot.

P. You can't do it politically until after the '74 elections, that's for sure. Your point is that even then you couldn't do it.

D. That's right. It may further involve you in a way you should not be involved in this.

P. No — it is wrong that's for sure.

P. He (Hunt) is playing hard ball with regard to Ehrlichman for example, and that sort of thing. He knows what he's got.

H. What's he planning on, money?

D. Money and . . .

H. Really?

P. It's about \$120,000. That's what, Bob. That would be easy. It is not easy to deliver, but it is easy to get. Now.

H. If the case is just that way, then the thing to do if the thing cranks out.

P. If, for example, you say look we are not going to continue to—let's say, frankly, on the assumption that if we continue to cut our losses, we are not going to win, but in the end, we are going to be bled to death. And in the end, it is all going to come out anyway. Then you get the worst of both worlds. We are going to lose, and people are going to —

H. And look like dopes!

P. And in effect, look like a cover-up. So that we can't do. Now the other line, however, if you take that line, that we are not going to continue to cut our losses, that means then we have to look square in the eye as to what the hell those losses are, and see which people can—so we can avoid criminal liability. Right?

D. Right.

P. Another way to do it then Bob, and John realizes this, is to continue to try to cut our losses. Now we have to take a look at that course

of action. First it is going to require approximately a million dollars to take care of the jackasses who are in jail. That can be arranged. That would be arranged. But you realize that after we are gone, and assuming we can expend this money, then they are going to crack and it would be an unseemly story . . . and the second thing is, we are not going to be able to deliver on any of a clemency thing . . .

P. John Ehrlichman, of course, has raised the point of another grand jury. I just don't know how you could do it. On what basis. I could call for it, but I

D. That would be out of the question.

P. I hate to leave with differences in view of all this stripped land. I could understand this, but think I want another grand jury proceeding and we will have the White House appear before them. Is that right John?

D. Uh huh,

P. That is the point, see. Of course! That would make the difference. I want everybody in the White House called. And that gives you a reason not to have to go before the Ervin and Baker committee. It puts it in an executive session, in a sense.

D. You can take the 5th Amendment.

P. That's right.

H. You can say you have forgotten too, can't you?

D. Sure but you are chancing a very high risk for perjury situation.

P. But you can say I don't remember. You can say I can't recall. I can't give any answer to that that I can recall.

H. You have the same perjury thing on the Hill don't you?

D. That's right.

P. Oh hell, yes.

H. And the Ervin committee is a hell of a lot worse to deal with.

D. That's right.

P. The grand jury thing has its in view of this thing. Suppose we have a grand jury thing. What would that do to the Ervin committee? Would it go right ahead?

D. Probably. Probably.

D. They're going to stonewall it, as it now stands. Excepting Hunt. That's why his threat.

H. It's Hunt opportunity.

P. That's why for your immediate things you have no choice but to come up with the \$120,000, or whatever it is. Right?

D. That's right.

P. Would you agree that that's the prime thing that you damn well better get that done?

D. Obviously he ought to be given some signal anyway.

P. (Expletive deleted), get it.

H. That is the thing that we thought Mitchell ought to be able to know how to find somebody who would know how to do all that sort of thing, because none of us know how to.

D. That's right. You have to wash the money. You can get a \$100,000 out of a bank, and it all comes in serialized bills.

P. I understand.

D. And that means you have to go to Vegas with it or a bookmaker in New York City. I have learned all these things after the fact. I will be in great shape for the next time around.

H. (expletive deleted)

P. And my point is that I think it is good, frankly, to consider these various options. And then, once you decide on the right plan, you say, "John," you say, "no doubts about the right plan before the election. You handled it just right. You contained it. And now after the election we have to have another plan. Because we can't for four years have this thing eating away." We can't do it.

H. We should change that a little bit. John's point is exactly right. The erosion here now is going to you, and that is the thing that we have to turn at whatever cost. We have to turn it off at the lowest cost we can, but at whatever cost it takes.

D. That's what we have to do.

P. Well, the erosion is inevitably going to come here, apart from anything and all the people saying well the Watergate isn't a major issue. It isn't. But it will be. It's bound to. (Unintelligible) has to go out. Delaying is the great danger to the White House area. We don't, I say that the White House can't do it. Right?

D. Yes, sir.