

Transcript Account

The Talks About Hush Money Nixon's Role

By William Greider
Washington Post

Washington

Four weeks after the fact, President Nixon admitted with regret that he did not shut off the secret "hush-money" payments to the Watergate defendants at the crucial meeting of March 21 when he first learned about them.

Furthermore, Mr. Nixon's remarks and the comments of his White House chief of staff H.R. Haldeman suggest that they both knew that yet another payment was delivered to defendant E. Howard Hunt as a result of the March 21 strategy meeting.

The president's damaging admission was found in the transcript of a meeting he had on April 17 of last year with Haldeman and John Ehrlichman. It conflicts with the President's public contention that he rejected the idea of paying any additional cash to keep Hunt quiet.

Further, it undermines Mr. Nixon's argument that March 21 was the day on which he put a halt to the coverup conspiracy in the White House by launching his own investigation. Federal investigators have already established that another \$75,000 was delivered to Hunt that night.

The April 17 meeting was an important turning point for the President's perspective on Watergate because it was the day when it first dawned on him that his former White House counsel John Dean might even implicate the President in the conspiracy.

Prior to that day, Mr. Nixon and his two closest aides operated on the assumption that Dean and others were in jeopardy, that Haldeman

and Ehrlichman might be drawn into the fast-spreading trouble — but that none of it would reach the chief executive himself.

In a long, rambling discussion shortly after noon, the three men began asking themselves what damaging

Back Page Col. 6

From Page 1

testimony Dean might provide against the President. That led them into a discussion of Mr. Nixon's conversations with Dean and particularly the March 21 meeting where Dean told him that Hunt was demanding blackmail cash in exchange for keeping quiet.

As they recollected aloud what they had said on March 21 about the secret payments, Haldeman suggested that the President had "explored the possibility of whether such kinds of money could be raised, "but concluded that "once you start down the path with blackmail it's constant escalation."

The President said, "Yep, that's my only conversation with regard to that."

Haldeman added: "They could jump and then say, 'Yes, well that was morally wrong. What you should have said is that blackmail is wrong, not that it's too costly.'"

The men tried briefly to establish from memory the

exact chronology of those crucial events. Then the President returned to the subject of the secret cash:

"Well (inaudible)," he said. "I suppose then we should have cut — shut it off, 'cause later on you met in your office and Mitchell said, 'That was taken care of.'"

"The next day," Haldeman volunteered, referring to another group discussion on March 22 with former Attorney General John Mitchell.

"Yeah," said the President, "and Dean was there and said, 'What about this money for Hunt?' Wasn't Dean there?"

Haldeman picked up the recollection: "Ehrlichman and Dean and Mitchell and I were in the office, my office and we were discussing other matters. And in the process of it, Mitchell said, he turned to Dean and said, 'Let me raise another point. Ah, have you taken care of the other point — the Hunt problem?' Something like that. I don't know how he referred to it. But we all knew instantly what he meant.

"Dean kind of looked a little flustered and said, 'Well, well, no. I don't know where that is or something.' And Mitchell said, 'Well, I guess it's taken care of.'

"And so we assumed from that Mitchell had taken care of it and there was no further squeak out of it so I now do assume that Mitchell took care of it."

The Watergate grand jury, when it indicted Haldeman, Ehrlichman and five others for the Watergate coverup, alleged that, after the March 21 meeting, Haldeman phoned Mitchell about the Hunt problem, Mitchell phoned Fred LaRue and that night another \$75,000 was delivered.

The discussion ended in vague reassurances that, after all, it was John Dean who was the agent for delivering secret money to the Watergate defendants while the others were passive spectators. "Dean's the agent on all this," said Haldeman. "That's where my money goes."

Ten days later, when Mr. Nixon was meeting with assistant Attorney General Henry Petersen, he gave Pe-

tersen a quite different version of how the question of cash had been resolved on March 21 — the version which was to become the White House's defense claim in public for the past year.

Petersen assured the President that, as of that moment, John Dean had not told the prosecutors anything to incriminate Mr. Nixon himself.

"Good," said the President. "Because if Dean is implicating the presidency — we are going to damned well find out about it. That's — that's because, let me tell you, the only conversations we ever had with him was that famous March 21st conversation I told you about, where he told me about Bittman (Hunt's attorney) coming to him. No, the Bittman request for \$120,000 for Hunt.

"And then I finally began to get at them. I explored with him thoroughly. 'Now what the hell is this for?' he said, 'it's because he's blackmailing Ehrlichman.' Remember, I said that's what it's about. And Hunt is going to recall the seamy

side of it. "And I asked him, 'well, how would you get it? How would you get it to them?' So forth."

Then the President offered this new version of how that issue was resolved:

"But my purpose was to find out what the hell had been going on before. And, believe me, nothing was approved. I mean, as far as I'm concerned, as far as I'm concerned, turned it off totally."

Thus, the conflict on the secret cash is between two Nixon versions. On April 17, he told Haldeman: "I suppose then we should have cut — shut it off." On April 27, he told the Justice Department official: "... as far as I'm concerned, turned it off totally."

In that April 17 dialogue with Haldeman and Ehrlichman, the President and his aides wavered between denouncing Dean as a turncoat and reassuring themselves that he would never had the nerve to do such a thing. Ehrlichman called him "a piranha" and "a jerk." Haldeman said Dean was "flying from flower to flow-

er, planting his pollen." The President complained about "very clever liars."

Haldeman couldn't believe that Dean would do it to them. "I cannot see him sinking low enough to use it," he said. "I just — although I must admit the guy has really turned into an unbelievable disaster for us. People don't — he's not un-American and anti-Nixon."

Mr. Nixon observed of his former lawyer: "He's going to do anything to save his ass. That's what is involved."

Throughout the discussion, the three men attempted to

minimize Dean's role in the White House, especially his proximity to the Oval Office. "Dean was just a messenger," Mr. Nixon said. All three agreed that Dean should not be granted immunity by the federal prosecutors.

The moment of realization for Mr. Nixon came when Ehrlichman was discussing his own lack of contact with Dean during the months of coverup. The President insisted he had even less to do with John Dean. The conversation went like this:

Ehrlichman: "... the things that I am going to have to say about Dean are: that basically Dean was the sole proprietor of this project, that he reported to the President, he reported to me only incidentally."

Nixon: "Reported to the President?"

Ehrlichman: "Yes sir, in other words—"

Nixon: "When?"

Ehrlichman: "Well, I don't know when, but the point is—"

Nixon: "You see the problem you've got there is that Dean does have a point there which you've got to realize. He didn't see me when he came out to California. He didn't see me until the day you said, 'I think you ought to talk to John Dean.'"

In any case, Mr. Nixon insisted that Dean was always kept at arms length from the oval office. "I was a little busy," the President said, "and all of you said,

'Lets let Dean handle this and keep him out of the President's office.' and maybe you didn't want him in there for other reasons too."

The three men also tried to reconstruct exactly what they had said to Dean about the \$120,000 and they agreed that none of it could harm them. Their recollection on April 17 also is in conflict with what the White House transcript shows they actually said on March 21:

Haldeman: "Ehrlichman has no problem with this thing with Hunt." And Ehrlichman said, "(Expletive removed) if you're going to get into blackmail, to hell with it."

Nixon: "(Unintelligible), Thank God, you were in there when it happened. But you remember the conversation?"

Haldeman: "Yes sir."