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**Transcripts Tell an Epic Story
Of How Powerful Men Reacted**

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WASHINGTON, May 5—The erosion of power—of men who control events gradually overcome by those events — leaps out from the huge transcript of White House conversations that President Nixon made public last week.

Just two months before the Presidential elections—on Sept. 15, 1972, when the released transcripts begin — the President was as relaxed and confident as any man could be who has tasted bitter, unexpected defeat and sweet victory in a long political life. He was about to be re-elected, despite the shadow of Water-

This article was prepared by Anthony Ripley, Walter Rugaber and Philip Shabecoff.

gate, by one of the largest margins in history.

Seven months later — on April 17, 1973, when the released transcripts end—he was clinging to his high office, speaking of the “agony” of his political life in phases touched by desperation.

This epic—a long and dramatic narrative dealing with men at the pinnacle of power—emerges from the 1,308-page “Submission of Recorded Presidential Conversations,” which includes 1,254 pages of edited

transcripts of the most private Presidential conversations.

But in their jerky, broken sentences, their interrupted thoughts, their censored expletives and their portions marked “inaudible” and “unintelligible,” the transcripts should be considered for what they are—30 meetings and 16 telephone conversations, edited to contain matters dealing with Watergate.

Friends of John W. Dean 3d, the President's former counsel and a major player in the drama, say he told them that large and significant chunks of

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conversation have been left out.

But one theme nevertheless cuts through this version of the chronicle like a razor stroke: Save the President.

Mr. Nixon seems to see the Congress and later the Watergate grand jury stalking him. To appease them, he casts off one close associate after another. Mr. Dean is an “hors d'oeuvre” and John N. Mitchell, the former Attorney General, the “big enchalada.” Again and again, Mr. Nixon speaks of “the big fish” that are to be sacrificed.

Mr. Dean's status changes from the trusted aid who drew up the White House enemies list to the top name on the same list.

In the Beginning . . .

To understand this metamorphosis and all the others, it is necessary to begin at the beginning of the transcripts made public:

The meeting in the Oval Office on Sept. 15, 1972, was a wide-ranging affair, and if anyone had any reservations about the seemingly bright future, it was the President.

The Watergate grand jury had indicted seven men for the break-in on June 17 at the Democratic national headquarters in the Watergate office building. Five of them had been caught inside, red-handed.

The President joked with Mr. Mitchell on the telephone: “This thing is just one of those side issues and a month later everybody looks back and wonders what all the shooting was about . . . get a good night's sleep. And don't bug anybody without asking me.”

But in private with Mr. Dean and H. R. Haldeman, then the White House chief of staff, the President was more cautious about the future.

“The worst may happen but it may not,” he said. “So you just try to button it up as well as you can and hope for the best, and remember, basically the damn business is, unfortunately, trying to cut our losses.”

The Enemies List

Mr. Haldeman was pleased that Watergate had been “kept away” from the White House and the President. They talked about using Federal agencies, such as the Federal Bureau of

Investigation, to strike back at their enemies.

Mr. Dean said he had begun to keep an enemies list. The President urged him on, saying of his enemies, “They asked for it and they are going to get it.”

There seemed to be a sense that things could be done, problems managed. Five months later, when the next tape transcript begins, the mood had changed markedly. By then one of the burglars, James W. McCord Jr., had indicated that higher officials were involved, and Watergate was unraveling. There was now a Senate Watergate committee, created by a 70-to-0 vote. Judge John J. Sirica of United States District Court was not satisfied that the Justice Department prosecutors had gone deep enough. There were reports of hush money payments to the Watergate burglars.

“We have come a long road on this thing now,” Mr. Dean told the President on Feb. 28, 1973.

“I had thought it was an impossible task to hold it together until after the election until things started falling out. But we have made it this far and I am convinced we are going to make it the whole road and put this thing in the funny pages of the history books rather than anything serious because actually—”

“It will be somewhat serious,” Mr. Nixon broke in. “But the main thing, of course, is also the isolation of the President.”

“Absolutely, totally true” Mr. Dean replied.

Mr. Dean stressed, in discussing tactics for dealing with the Senate Watergate committee, that “the President should not become involved in any part of this case.”

The Gray Hearings

Two weeks later, on March 13, the President and Mr. Dean met again, and the long discussion touched upon the Senate confirmation hearings for L. Patrick Gray 3d as director of the F.B.I., Mexican checks and the Watergate burglars, Judge Sirica and bringing to light alleged wrongdoing by former Democratic President.

Is it too late, the President asked, to tell all, to let it all “hang out?”

Too late, Mr. Dean replied. There is a “domino situation” he told the President. If “some things start going, a lot of other things are going to start going”

and there are “dangers” in that, he said.

Besides, he added, no one would believe the White House.

The President attributed his Watergate problems to the “establishment.”

“The establishment is dying,” he said, “and so they've got to show that the — despite the successes we have had in foreign policy and in the election, they've got to show that it is just wrong just because of this.”

Four days later, on March 17, they met again and Mr. Dean described the burglary of the office of Dr. Daniel Ellsberg's former psychiatrist in 1971 by the White House “plumbers” unit. The President appeared astounded.

However, it was not until

April 27 that the judge in the Pentagon papers case—William Matthew Byrne Jr., who had meanwhile been approached about the F. B. I. directorship—announced that he had learned of the burglary.

On March 20, the President told Mr. Dean in a telephone call that he needed a report on Watergate to show Republican leaders and Cabinet members who might need reassurance. The President said he wanted to be able to tell them that he had a complete report on the situation.

“But make it very incomplete,” he advised.

There were morning and afternoon meetings on March 21 in the Oval Office, and Mr. Dean told the President that “a cancer” was growing near the Presidency — the Watergate cover-up.

Perjury, Blackmail

There was talk of perjury, blackmail, cover-up and executive clemency.

“We decided,” Mr. Dean said, “there was no price too high to pay” to keep the situation under control before the election.

He suggested that it might cost \$1-million to buy the silence of E. Howard Hunt Jr., another of the convicted Watergate burglars. Mr. Dean said that \$120,000 was needed right away.

“... You have no choice but to come up with the \$120,000, or whatever it is. Right?” the President asked.

“That's right,” Mr. Dean replied.

“Would you agree that that's

the prime thing, that you damn well better get that done?" Mr. Nixon asked.

"Obviously," Mr. Dean said. "He ought to be given some signal anyway."

On the question of clemency, Mr. Nixon said:

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."

"That's right," Mr. Dean answered. "It may further involve you in a way you should not be involved in this."

"No. It is wrong—that's for sure," the President said.

The problem outlined by the President was that they could continue to pay money — cut their losses, as he put it — and "be bled to death."

'Worst of Both Worlds'

"And in the end, it is all going to come out anyway," he said. "Then you get the worst of both worlds."

Word was out on past payments and it would continue to look like a cover-up, he said. The alternative, he said, was to take a look at those losses and decide who must be sacrificed.

Mr. Mitchell and Jeb Stuart Magruder, the deputy director of the Committee for the Re-election of the President, were mentioned as the likely candidates, and that would keep it out of the White House. Perhaps they should draw names from a hat, Mr. Dean suggested.

The next day, March 22, Mr. Dean huddled for a time with John D. Ehrlichman, then the President's domestic adviser, and at greater length with Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Mitchell, who had been summoned from New York. Then at 2 P.M., they met with the President.

"Mr. President, I am just great — how are you?" Mr. Mitchell said.

Mr. Nixon, in turn, joshed his old confidant and partner, welcoming him as a "a big Wall Street lawyer" who would have to admit he was rich.

A discussion of almost two hours then ensued, rambling and largely inconclusive, during which they considered the forthcoming Senate Watergate investigation.

Mr. Dean was ordered to Camp David to work on a Watergate report, and the President considered publication of his counsel's findings. Only at the end of the session was there a hint of nervousness, as this exchange indicates:

Mr. Nixon: Do you think we want to go this route now? Let it hang out, so to speak?

Mr. Dean: Well, it isn't really that—

Mr. Haldeman: It is a limited hangout. It's not an absolute hangout.

Mr. Nixon: But some of the questions look big hanging out publicly or privately.

On March 27, "the Ellsberg thing" and "an operation for leaks" were discussed. At first, Mr. Nixon sought this rationale:

"Mitchell could say, 'I know. I never approved this damn plan.' You've got to figure the lines of defense that everybody's going to take here. That's Mitchell's. Right? What's Haldeman's line of defense? Haldeman's line of defense, 'I never approved anything of the sort. I just — You know that What's Ehrlichman's? There is no doubt he knows nothing about it. The earlier thing, yes. We did have an operation [the plumbers' group] for leaks, etc. . . . You would say it was ordered on a national security basis."

On March 30, Mr. Nixon tried to chart a more conciliatory course. He instructed his press secretary, Ronald L. Ziegler, to "let them see that we are backing down a bit." Mr. Ziegler announced that day that White House officials could go before the committee in closed session.

On April 8, Mr. Ehrlichman informed the President that Mr. Dean felt the "smartest thing that he, Dean, could do" would be to testify before the grand

jury and "appear cooperative." The President replied, "Right."

The situation continued to deteriorate rapidly, however, and by the weekend of April 14-15, it had become ominous. Sixteen of the 49 edited transcripts cover conversations at the White House that fateful Saturday and Sunday.

It became apparent that ranking associates would have to be sacrificed and that the President might be vulnerable. Mr. Nixon began to tell his aides that he had no incriminating knowledge, that his motives—and theirs—were pure.

A 3-Hour Talk

At 8:55 A.M. on Saturday, Mr. Nixon, Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Ehrlichman gathered in the Executive Office Building and talked for nearly three hours. Mr. Mitchell was again asked to come down from New York.

The former Attorney General is "the probable wrong-doer," Mr. Ehrlichman told the President, and he should be informed that "it's clear . . . that you are guilty as hell."

The three men learned that Mr. Magruder had gone to the prosecutors that morning to admit participation in the bugging and in the subsequent cover-up.

The President reviewed the situation. The question of payments to the Watergate seemed to bother him, and he said:

"Dean asked, told me about the problem of Hunt's lawyer. This was a few weeks ago. Needed \$60,000 or \$40,000 or something like that. You remember?"

"I said I don't know where you can get it. I said, I mean, I frankly felt he might try to get it, but I didn't know where."

That night, Mr. Nixon told Mr. Haldeman during a telephone conversation:

"... Damn it all, these guys that participated in raising money, etc., have got to stick to their line—that they did not raise this money to obstruct justice."

Mr. Nixon's anxiety about his two closest aides appeared to intensify. He called Mr. Ehrlichman just before midnight Saturday and brought up Mr. Haldeman:

"And the thing about Bob, as I say, is this: I get back to my fundamental point. Is he guilty or is he not? In my view he is not, you know."

Kleindienst Report

On Sunday afternoon, when Attorney General Richard G. Kleindienst informed him that Mr. Dean had gone to the prosecutors' secretary and implicated Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Ehrlichman, Mr. Nixon observed:

"If Dean does not testify about deep-sixing documents and getting Hunt out of the country, they [the Watergate prosecutors] have nobody else that can say that."

The Attorney General had explained to the President that Mr. Dean's principal charges against Mr. Ehrlichman were that Mr. Ehrlichman had once proposed throwing documents into the Potomac River and that on another occasion he had ordered Mr. Hunt to flee the country.

The President, while continuing to stand up for his key aides ("Well, people make mistakes, but you don't fire a guy for a mistake, do you?"), seemed to become more and more concerned about his own difficulties.

"We can't get the President involved in this," he said on Sunday morning.

Then in a telephone conversation with Mr. Ehrlichman just before 11 A.M., he seemed to realize that precisely such a situation was possible.

Mr. Nixon: . . . I mean, suppose they just indict Magruder and Mitchell.

Mr. Ehrlichman: Yeah.

Mr. Nixon: Well, that's the fish.

Mr. Ehrlichman: Yeah.

Mr. Nixon: The big fish.

Mr. Ehrlichman: Yeah.

Mr. Nixon: Damn it, what more do they want?

The Dean Problem

By the morning of April 16, President Nixon seemed to perceive that Mr. Dean was a serious, perhaps grave threat.

He discussed with Mr. Ehrlichman ways to contain Mr. Dean's testimony to the Federal prosecutors, particularly on the plumbers' unit and on wire-tapping operations. He also prepared two documents—one a letter of resignation, the other a request for a leave of absence—and wanted Mr. Dean to sign both so that he had a choice of actions.

Mr. Dean entered the Oval Office at 10 A.M. for what was probably one of the tensest episodes portrayed in the long document.

When asked whose departure the President should announce, Mr. Dean replied, "Well I think it ought to be Dean, Ehrlichman and Haldeman."

The President said, "Well, I thought Dean at this point."

Mr. Dean indicated that he was being made the scapegoat to save Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Ehrlichman and felt he should not take the blame alone. And he would not, as he announced publicly a few days later.

This conversation contains none of the jargon and incomplete sentences that characterized previous meetings between Mr. Nixon and his close aides. The young lawyer and the President of the United States were precise in their choice of words. There were few expletives to delete.

Mr. Nixon inquired about

questions that might be presented to Mr. Dean by the prosecutors and he seemed to try to coach Mr. Dean on the answers, particularly on the issues of the payments to Mr. Hunt and on bugging operations. He urged Mr. Dean to invoke executive privilege on "the electronic stuff."

'Don't Ever Lie'

Then, recalling the Alger Hiss case, as he did many times in these conversations, he admonished Mr. Dean, "So believe me, don't ever lie."

Mr. Dean replied, "the truth always emerges. It always does."

However, the President seemed to think that the problem could still be kept away from the Oval Office. At a meeting 10 minutes later in the Oval Office with his two chief aides, he told Mr. Haldeman that the Government would have a difficult time proving a case.

The problem, Mr. Haldeman replied, "is our moral thing. Basically, it is a P.R. job."

Mr. Nixon agreed and then asked, "How do I get credit for getting Magruder to the stand?"

Mr. Ehrlichman guided the President through still another scenario to explain the Watergate scandal and how it happened with the emphasis seemingly on presenting the best possible public posture.

The president asked if the Ehrlichman report should be made public at some point. Mr. Ehrlichman and Mr. Haldeman advised against it.

"It was not a formal report, it was a set of notes," Mr. Haldeman informed the President.

"Handwritten notes?" The President asked.

"Yeah," said Mr. Ehrlichman. "There are about seven pages or eight pages, plus all my notes of my interviews."

That appears to be all there was to the "Ehrlichman report."

Strain Is Apparent

By this time, the inner circle at the White House seems to have begun to disintegrate under the strain.

Mr. Haldeman suggested that Mr. Dean had to be "hung."

Mr. Ehrlichman worried about the loyalty of Charles W. Colson, a special counsel to the President.

Mr. Haldeman complained, "It is impossible for any of us" to remain "cool."

"I have a horrible feeling that we may react," said the President. "React like Dean."

The long story of the tapes was now racing toward its denouement. Henry M. Petersen, an Assistant Attorney General in charge of the Justice Department's Watergate inquiry, met with the President on the after-transcript is marked "(inaudible)" to the point of incomprehensibility.

It was at this meeting that Mr. Petersen warned the President that Mr. Dean would defend himself by seeking to implicate "Ehrlichman, Haldeman, Nixon and this Administration."

The President repeatedly stressed the need "to be out front" on the Watergate story, to be first to announce the news of major figures being implicated and to take credit for uncovering the facts.

But events were no longer controlled by the White House.

Mr. Magruder and Mr. Dean had talked to the prosecutors. Startling disclosures were being leaked to the newspapers. Mr. Nixon was running out of time.

"I would like a policy," the President said to Mr. Haldeman on the morning of April 17. "I think, Bob, we have to think about a positive move. I think it ought to be today."

Mr. Nixon, Mr. Ehrlichman and Mr. Haldeman agreed that there was one fundamental point that must be established. John Dean should not be granted immunity from prosecution because then Mr. Dean could be free to talk and implicate his superiors at the White House without endangering himself.

No Immunity

From that point on, Mr. Nixon sought to persuade Mr. Petersen that none of the White House higher-ups should be immune from prosecution. His stated reason was that the guilty should not be allowed to go unpunished. But the record of his conversation with Mr. Ehrlichman and Mr. Haldeman indicates that the purpose of this course was to keep Mr. Dean from talking.

At 4:42 on the afternoon of April 17, the President went before the news media with a statement on the Watergate affair.

"... as a result of serious new charges which came to my attention... I began intensive new inquiries into this whole matter..."

"... I can report today that there have been major developments in the case concerning which it would be improper to be more specific now, except to say that real progress has been made in finding the truth... No individual... should be given immunity..."

The lid was really off now, and the President has never been able to put it back on.

In the days following the announcement, the President seemed relieved that the matter was finally out in the open and the tone of his conversations is relaxed for the first time in weeks.

What was the philosophical reaction to this "whole damned thing?" he asked his former Secretary of State, William P. Rogers. Was it a "comic tragedy? Tragedy of errors?"

He also seemed to feel the worst was over. "We'll survive this," he told another visitor. "People said this destroys the Administration and the rest—but what was this? What was Watergate? A little bugging," I mean a terrible thing. It shouldn't have been done, shouldn't have been covered up... but we've got to beat it."

Another Mood Change

This mood was short-lived. On April 27, the President heard The New York Times was about to publish a report that said Mr. Dean had implicated the President in the Watergate cover-up.

Mr. Nixon summoned Mr. Petersen.

"We've really got to head them off at the pass," he said, "because it's so damned—so damned dangerous to the Presidency in a sense..."

Mr. Petersen reported that Mr. Dean's lawyer had threatened to bring the President into the case with charges not directly related to Watergate, such as the burglary of Dr. Ellsberg's former psychiatrist. He said that he had told the

prosecutors not to investigate the President's role.

"We have to draw the line," Mr. Petersen said he had told the prosecutor. "We have no mandate to investigate the President."

The President, meanwhile, seemed almost frantic as he sought to convince Mr. Petersen that he had not tried to cover up the crime.

"You've got to believe me," he said, "I am after the truth, even if it hurts me. But believe me, it won't."

The President seemed to be trying to intimidate Mr. Petersen into assuring that Mr. Dean would not be granted immunity.

"Do I make myself clear?" he said.

But Mr. Petersen appeared to stand firm. Replying to the President, "Let me make myself clear," he said that the responsibility of granting immunity was his and that he could not divest himself of it.

Mr. Petersen then told the President that Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Ehrlichman were seriously implicated in the Watergate affair and that they would have to go.

Three days later, on April 30, President Nixon went on television with a startling series of announcements:

¶He had accepted the resignation of Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Ehrlichman, "two of the finest public servants it has been my privilege to know."

¶Mr. Kleindienst, "a distinguished public servant," would be replaced by Elliot L. Richardson as Attorney General.

¶"The counsel to the President, John Dean, has also resigned."

Pursuit of Justice

The President declared that justice would be pursued "fairly, fully and impartially."

The President ended his speech—and the long, historic, astonishing document—with these words: "God bless America and God bless each and every one of you."

That was one year and one week ago.

Since that day, there have been these developments, among a multitude of others:

¶Mr. Dean has pleaded guilty to an information charging conspiracy to obstruct justice and defraud the United States. His sentencing was deferred.

¶Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Ehrlichman have been indicted on several counts, including conspiracy, obstruction of justice, perjury by Mr. Haldeman and making false statements to agents of the F.B.I. by Mr. Ehrlichman. Their trial is set for Sept. 9.

¶A number of other former high officials, including Mr. Mitchell and Mr. Colson, are also awaiting trial.

¶The seven original Watergate burglars and several former Administration officials have either been sentenced to, or have completed, jail terms.

¶The House Judiciary Committee is determining whether it will present a bill of impeachment against the President.

And the tape-recording machines, first revealed last July 16 by Alexander P. Butterfield, a Presidential aide, during testimony before the Senate Watergate committee, have been removed from the White House. That occurred last July 21, less than a week after Mr. Butterfield's casual—and stunning—disclosure.