

Transcripts

"Let me just say this: I am not obsessed by how the press reports me. I am going to do my job and I am not going to be diverted by criticism from the press..."

President Nixon at a March 19 press conference.

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For a man who professed near indifference to the press, President Nixon is revealed in the edited transcripts of presidential conversations as caring very much about the news media—how to use it, cope with it, intimidate it and, occasionally, deceive it.

The transcripts released by the White House last week show that Mr. Nixon and his aides carefully planned press conferences and briefings. They weighed the public relations aspect of important decisions, often assigning the press as much importance as the Senate Watergate committee and the special prosecutor's office.

"The failing of the whole business in the Oval Office is that the President thinks the press is too important," said a White House official after studying the transcripts. "Things were played to that (the press) and not to what the law was."

The transcripts leave no doubt that the President considered large segments of the press, especially major eastern newspapers and the television networks, to be his enemies. The press, Mr. Nixon makes clear, is a major component of the "they"—that amorphous, ill-defined entity antagonistic to him and his goals.

Mr. Nixon's feelings, the transcripts indicate, are at least partly based on his conviction that he has been unfairly treated by the press and that it is for the most part anti-Nixon—"three to one against us," the President remarks at one point.

"I think this is typical," commented George Reedy, President Johnson's press secretary from 1964 to August, 1965. "It's the way most politicians really feel—the concept of the media as the enemy. Most politicians have a concept of being beleaguered by the media in which they fight for preferred positions."

What is atypical in this case, Reedy said, is the fact that Mr. Nixon's private remarks have been placed on the public record.

The transcripts also show that Mr. Nixon is a student of his self-defined enemy. He reads the very newspapers he considers the most unfair—The Washington Post and The New York Times. He knows the bylines of various reporters and discusses several of them by name. He is, at least in John Dean's estimation, knowledgeable on how to leak news to reporters, while at the same time pro-

fessing concern about leaks from others in government of damaging information.

The transcripts, for all their volume, deal exclusively with Watergate, and thus may not provide an accurate reflection of Mr. Nixon's feelings about the press generally. However, the conversations in the transcripts are consistent with public statements the President has made on the media, statements that go all the way back to his famous press conference in 1962 when he bitterly denounced the press following his defeat in the California gubernatorial election.

The President's attitude came spilling out, for example, in a conversation he had on Feb. 28, 1973, with White House counsel John W. Dean III in which they both discussed a civil suit in which newsmen were subpoenaed.

"Well, one hell of a lot of people don't give one damn about this issue of suppression of the press, etc.," Mr. Nixon said. "We know that we aren't trying to do it. They all squeal about it. It is amusing to me when they say—I watched the networks and I thought they were restrained."

"What (expletive omitted) do they want them to do—go through the 1968 syndrome when they were eight to one against us. They are only three to one this time."

"It is really sickening though to see these guys," the President continued. "These guys have always figured we have the press on our side. You know we have a modest amount of support—no more."

From the transcript, it is not clear if Mr. Nixon is referring to support on Watergate or press support of his administration in general. Likewise, his reference to 1968—"they were eight to one against us"—is also not clear. If the President is referring to editorial support of his candidacy in that election year, his figures are far off base. Like most Republican presidential candidates, Mr. Nixon received the bulk of newspaper endorsements in 1968.

Four years later—in 1972—he received 17 newspaper endorsements for every one received by his Democratic opponent, Sen. George McGovern. Even in his 1960 race against John F. Kennedy, Mr. Nixon was the clear favorite of America's newspaper publishers. Mr. Nixon received the endorsement of 731 daily newspapers with a circulation of 38 million, while Kennedy was backed by 208 newspapers with an aggregate circulation of 8.4 million.

While Mr. Nixon perceives the press as both unfair and hostile, the transcripts indi-

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Show Nixon Viewed Press



Associated Press

The press receives copies of the Nixon transcripts—and gets a view of itself through White House eyes.

cate that he recognized some friends in the press corps and at one point suggested to Dean that they be used to leak information that the White House itself is reluctant to release.

This discussion, which took place on March 17, 1973, concerned information that Dean said he had learned from former FBI official William Sullivan — the Johnson administration allegedly bugged the 1968 campaign plane of Spiro T. Agnew and bugged Anna Chennault, a prominent Republican hostess who supports the Thieu regime in South Vietnam.

"Maybe we need to go to the U.S. News, sir," Dean said while discussing how to pass on the information. He was referring to the U.S. News and World Report magazine.

The President, who was articulating a variety of options including having Sullivan appear before a congressional committee, said, "Rather than going to a hearing, do 'Meet the Press,' and that will force the hearing to call him. That is quite the way to do it. Have him give an interview to U.S. News, 'Wires in the Sky' or something (a reference to the bugging of the Agnew plane?). A respected reporter — why not give it to Mollenhoff?"

Clark Mollenhoff, Washington bureau chief of the Des Moines Register and Tribune, served as a special counselor to the President for a year in the early days of the Nixon administration.

Dean said the President's suggestion of Mollenhoff was "interesting," but noted that Mollenhoff "may not do anything."

"No, and we are in a position with Mollenhoff that he has been fighting us some," the President said. "Maybe Mollenhoff would be a pretty good prospect for this

thing. It is the kind of story he loves, but he digs on something..."

"OK," Dean said. "Can I call Clark and say, 'Listen Clark, a guy has brought me a piece of dynamite that I don't even want in the White House?'"

Mr. Nixon and Dean appear to be talking about the possibility of leaking information to Mollenhoff and offering Sullivan for a U. S. News interview. But if there was any suspicion that Mr. Nixon and his aides sometimes leaked information—while simultaneously denouncing leaks and attempting to find their source—it is dispelled in other conversations.

In a February 28, 1973, meeting with Dean, for instance, the President asked Dean how the White House could publicize its belief that the financial records of the McGovern campaign were—in Dean's words—in "such bad shape."

"How are you going to bring it out?" Mr. Nixon asked. "You can't bring it out in these hearings."

"Well, I think I would rather do it independently, so that the media types will bring it out," Dean replied. Chuck (Colson) is going to be of aid when he is out there (in private law practice) and not connected with the White House, coming through with bits of tidbits. Chuck will still have his channel to flip things out."

"Sure! Sure!" the President said.

At the same meeting, Dean told Mr. Nixon that it was his belief that Sam Dash, chief counsel for the Watergate committee, was Sen. Edward M. Kennedy's choice for the job. "I think this is something we will be able to quietly and slowly document," Dean told the President.

"Leak this to the press

come much more apparent," and the parts and cast be—Dean said.

For a President whose news conferences became rare events and who preferred whenever possible to take his message directly to the people on television, Mr. Nixon nevertheless seriously weighed press reaction to his decisions.

At the April 14, 1973, meeting with Ehrlichman, Mr. Nixon discussed what would happen if former Attorney General John N. Mitchell and others told their stories to the grand jury and were indicted. When Mr. Nixon asked Ehrlichman to evaluate that possibility—"John, run those by," his aide did so in terms of a news story.

"I'm trying to write the news magazine story for next Monday," Ehrlichman said.

"Right," said the President.

"Monday week," Ehrlichman continued. "And it is 'The Grand Jury Indicts Mitchell.'"

"Right," said Mr. Nixon. "The White House may have had its cover-up finally collapse last week when the grand jury indicted John Mitchell and Jeb Magruder."

"Right," said Mr. Nixon.

Ehrlichman, speaking in headlines, continued to outline the imaginary story and then said, "That's one set of facts. And then the tag line is, 'White House press secretary Ron Ziegler said that the White House would have no comment.'"

"I know, I know," said Mr. Nixon. "It can't be done."

Another indication of the importance the White House attached to the press, is the amount of presidential time devoted to the media in Oval Office conversations. The President's top aides were apparently given license to discuss the subject,

even when what they had to say came down to nothing more than gossip.

In one of the April 17, 1973, conversations, the President, Ehrlichman and Haldeman discussed what the press might know, basing some of their guesses on distinctly third-hand accounts. First, Haldeman apparently thought it was important that Dean knew Ronald Ostrow of the Los Angeles Times and that Ostrow covered the Justice Department.

Next the President reported on something he allegedly learned from Petersen who had apparently learned of a remark made by Harry M. Rosenfeld, the metropolitan editor of The Washington Post.

"He told me about conversations with that ... the wife of (unintelligible) apparently at some table with (unintelligible) libber they addressed, and the top guy, Rosenblatt or something like that at The Post, was talking to somebody else of the staff," Mr. Nixon said.

"The press is going to get out in front—we've got a hell of a lot more—we've just held it back.' They might be bluffing—I would doubt that they are at this point."

"I would doubt that they probably have more, but I would guess what they have more of is in the committee," Haldeman said. "I don't think they got much more in the White House, unless, I don't know what it could be unless they got Colson stuff—that would be the only area."

Like other Presidents, Mr. Nixon attempted to anticipate questions Ziegler would receive at White House news briefings. The transcripts show that Mr. Nixon rehearsed possible answers with Dean, Haldeman and Ehrlichman.

With Dismay

At a March 27, 1973, meeting in the Executive Office Building, the President, Ehrlichman and Ziegler reviewed questions that might be asked about a possible upcoming grand jury appearance by Dean.

The President instructed Ziegler to emphasize that Dean was "counsel to the White House—use the White House. Say, 'He is the White House counsel . . .'"

Later on, the President gave Ziegler some more instructions: "Then they are going to break into questions. I would simply stall them off today. Say that is not before us at this time, but let me emphasize, as the President had indicated, there will be complete cooperation consistent with the responsibilities that everybody has on the separation of powers. Fair enough? And, of course, consistent with Mr. Dean's other responsibilities as counsel."

"See? How about saying it that way? Well, John, do you have any doubts?"

Ziegler, who at one meeting was told by the President to go out there "and act like your usual cocky, confident self," occasionally got terser marching orders: "Kill it, kill it hard," was the President's order to his press secretary about a rumored story in both The Washington Post and The New York Times.

Some of the President's harshest statements about the media in the transcripts are reserved for individual reporters. When he learns that Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of the Washington Post are about to break a Watergate story, the President instructs Ziegler to "take a hard line".

" . . . Any thing on that they better watch their damned cotton-picking faces."

So loathsome was the press in the Nixon White House that the President calls it "painful" to attend the White House correspondents dinner at which both Woodward and Bernstein were being honored for their coverage of Watergate.

Similarly, when the President is considering the possibility of appearing personally before a grand jury, he likens it to the publicity-shy Haldeman appearing on television. "With Dan Rather," quipped Haldeman.

The President appeared familiar with the by-lines and the work of Washington Post reporter Haynes Johnson and New York Times reporter Seymour Hersh—although he and his aides have nothing good to say about either newsman, both of whom have won the Pulitzer Prize.

In an April 15, 1973, conversation Mr. Nixon refers to a story written by Johnson and Washington Post

staff writer Jules Witcover and says to Ehrlichman, "That is just not true." Their story said that a survey of Ohio and Michigan voting precincts found Watergate had become a major factor in voters' minds, while it had not been a major issue when the reporters surveyed the same voters just prior to the 1972 election six months before.

Ehrlichman: . . . Haynes Johnson, of course, is notorious for finding what he's looking for.

Mr. Nixon: Of course.

Ehrlichman: You remember after the election and that great national survey (apparently a reference to the Johnson-Witcover story that found Mr. Nixon respected by many voters for his achievements in both domestic and foreign affairs)?

Mr. Nixon: Yes, and also that he (unintelligible) practically killed him to do it . . .

In comparing the newspapers he read most closely, the President said at a February 28, 1973, meeting that a story in The Washington Post about Robert Vesco's \$20,000 campaign contribution and a New York Times account of the same story were different in that the Times reported on Page 1 that the contribution was returned while The Post did not report that fact until the "back section."

"That is correct," Dean said.

"The Post didn't have it until after you continued to the back section," the President went on. "It is the (adjective omitted) thing I ever saw."

"Typical," said Dean.

The Post story also noted on Page 1 that Vesco's contribution was returned. The Times reported it in the second paragraph, the Post in the 10th.)

The transcripts reveal that Mr. Nixon, like many newsmen and politicians, thought the Watergate story would fail to keep continued public interest. At a February 28, 1973, meeting he said he agreed with Sen. Howard Baker (R-Tenn.) that interest in the Watergate hearings would "fall off" after a week of testimony by major administration witnesses.

Two weeks later, however, the President revised his estimate, predicting then that the public would lose interest in the hearings in about three weeks.

"Don't you agree?" he asked Dean.

"No . . .," replied Dean.

On certain stories, the President seemed to step into a newsmen's shoes and comment on the news value of a story. He did that when referring to the conviction of the original Watergate conspirators.

"Seriously, it's a hell of a Washington story," he said.