

White House Hope: 'The Liddy Transcript'

The White House transcripts, otherwise so damaging to President Nixon, have confirmed that he at least attempted to break Watergate conspirator G. Gordon Liddy's silence a year ago—thereby suggesting one shaky line of defense against impeachment.

Mr. Nixon is not revealed by the transcripts as exerting any excess of energy to crack the Watergate scandal by forcing Liddy or anybody else to talk. But he did accede, somewhat hesitantly, to the request by the Watergate prosecutors to help with Liddy. He failed, prosecutors believe, because John Mitchell was running his part of the conspiracy. Mr. Nixon had always shied away from a direct run on Mitchell who was not talking and Liddy took orders only from Mitchell.

But the President's Liddy ploy may fit the new legalistic strategy of the White House. Even if the President's moral values emerge shredded by the transcripts, it might be argued he was not in total control and that he did finally cooperate with Justice Department efforts to break the scandal by breaking Liddy.

The President's discursive Watergate discussions with his counsel, John W. Dean III, during February and March 1973, show no interest in opening the sealed lips of Liddy or any other conspirator. On March 13, when Dean reported that White House aide Gordon Strachan was "stonewalling" the FBI, Mr. Nixon replied: "I guess he should, shouldn't he?"

Moments later, Mr. Nixon expressed admiration for the iron-disciplined Liddy, then refusing to give federal authorities the time of day. "How the hell does Liddy stand up so well?" he asked Dean. Dean's reply that Liddy's "loyalty is . . . just beyond the pale" brought more Nixon admiration: "He hates the other side too, doesn't he?" Though Mr. Nixon worried that E. Howard Hunt might crack, he knew Liddy would take the water torture before talking.

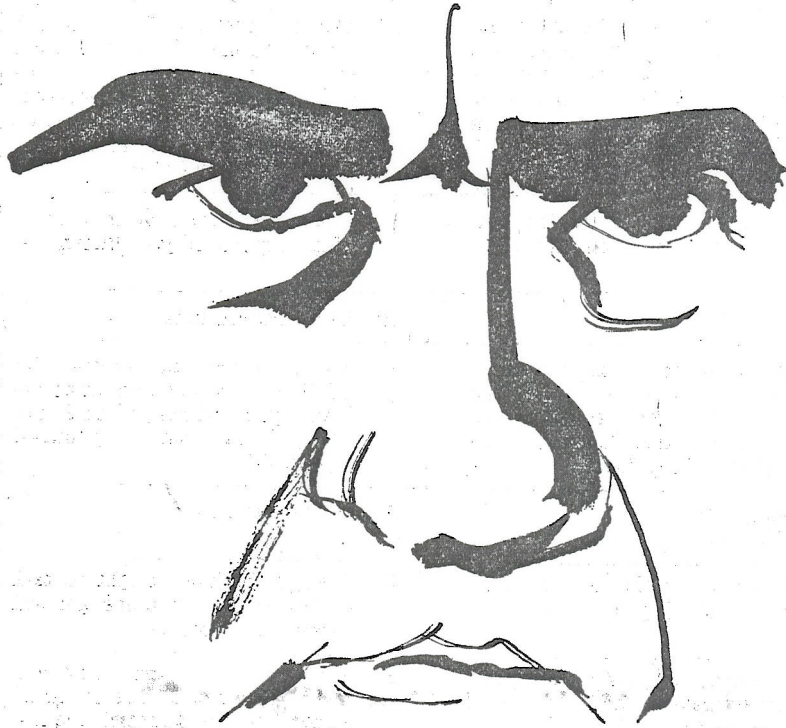
Nor did the Watergate prosecutors in the U.S. Attorney's Office here look to Liddy until the final stages of breaking the case in mid-April. Fearful of an impasse in their negotiations with Dean over immunity, they desperately sought an alternative witness. The fanatical Liddy would have seemed unlikely had not the prosecutors obtained information that Liddy had told Mitchell he would do whatever his superiors ordered—talk or not talk. Mitchell was his obvious "superior," but would not the President also qualify?

Thus, on Sunday evening, April 15, 1973, with the scandal cracking open, a request from the prosecutors was relayed by telephone to Mr. Nixon by As-

sistant Atty. Gen. Henry Petersen. "A signal from you might bring the truth from Liddy," Petersen said.

The transcript indicates discomfort by the President. After Mr. Nixon protested that "I never met the man. I don't know what I can do with him," Petersen responded that he would relay the presidential signal to Liddy. Mr. Nixon changed the subject: "I get it. Uh huh. OK. Now you will be through with your things you think by 12:30. Right?" Petersen dropped the subject.

Just seven minutes later, Mr. Nixon was back on the telephone to Petersen's home with a 180-degree change in attitude: "You are to tell him (Liddy)



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the President wants everybody involved in this to tell everything they know." When Petersen said he would contact Liddy's lawyer in the morning, Mr. Nixon insisted: "You might do it tonight . . . I don't want to stall around."

What happened during those seven minutes to so transform the President's attitude? Regrettably, there are no tapes for most Nixon office conversations of April 15. Unknown to Petersen, Nixon confidants H. R. Haldeman and John R. Ehrlichman were seated with him during both those telephone conversations. Since other tapes show them seeking a presidential image as zealous Watergate investigator, it can be assumed that they urged Mr. Nixon to call Petersen right back.

They were taking no great risks. Even if Liddy should talk, he had no connection with Haldeman, Ehrlichman or the President. He could incriminate only Mitchell, and transcripts of April 14 showed this would fit the Nixon strategy.

The signal was fruitless. The prosecutors concluded Liddy would take orders only from Mitchell, and Mitchell was not cooperating.

But the President now could claim he really tried to break the case. On April 27, he told press secretary Ron Ziegler: "Since March 21st when I had that conversation with Dean, I have broken my ass to get the facts of this case. Right? Tried to get that damn Liddy to talk."

The transcripts prove that claim is inflated. But they do show Nixon agreement to at least one prosecution request and, more important, his impotency with at least one Watergate conspirator.

This question remains: Why did Mr. Nixon never signal John Mitchell, his former intimate? Nevertheless the Liddy ploy gives his hard-pressed lawyers one slender reed to lean on, and for that they should be grateful.

Strategy was to have Mitchell take the blame for Watergate break-in. See Chronology, entry 14 Apr 73, Mitchell called to White House ...