

Dean Burch: Looking for His Logic

He may simply have been whistling past the graveyard. But if presidential counselor Dean Burch was being candid in Wednesday's New York Times—if he really believes the edited White House transcripts prove the President innocent of the Watergate cover-up—then you have to wonder if he read the same transcripts that have become a national best seller.

Burch got the questions right: "What did the President know? When did he know it? And what did he do about it?"

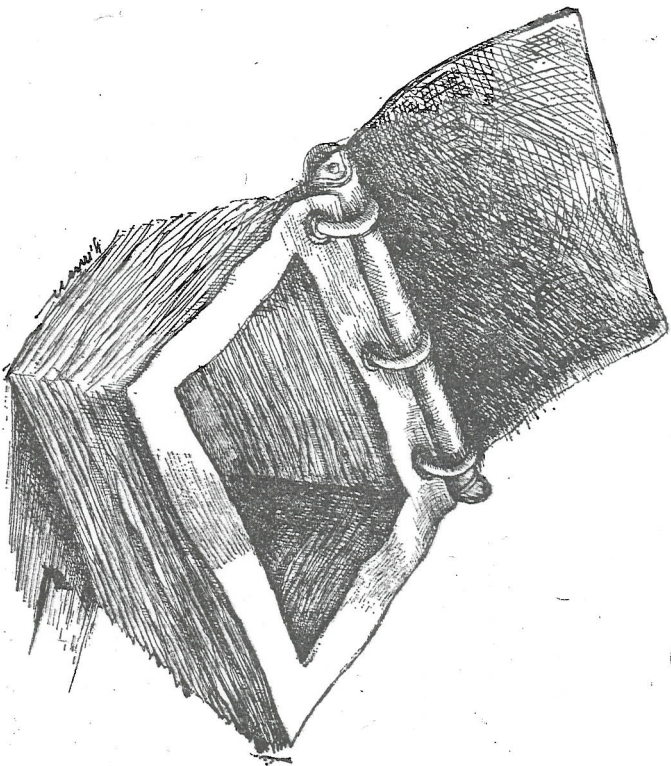
But his answers must have come from a document the rest of us never saw. According to Burch, "The President knew for the first time on March 21—and at no time before—of the Watergate cover-up."

Granted that any reasonable reading of the March 21 transcript shows that the President learned a good deal that day; granted also that there is no conclusive proof that he knew the whole scope of the cover-up before that day. It still is hard to find in the transcripts the basis for Burch's categorical denial of prior knowledge.

But there is infinitely less basis for the other conclusions drawn by Burch as to what the President did with the cover-up knowledge, however, and whenever it came to him.

To the former head of the Federal Communications Commission, it is crystal clear what the President did:

"He ordered Mr. (John) Dean to go to Camp David and prepare a written report on the matter. . . . He ordered Attorney General Richard G. Kleindienst to report directly to the President on any White House involvement. . . . He instructed all White House staff members, including Mr. Dean, to testify before the grand jury. . . . and the Senate Watergate Committee. . . . He received offers of resignations from H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman, which he later accepted." Burch's report, like the President's own statement prior to the release of



By Geoffrey Moss

the edited transcript, tries to show that the President really wanted to know, and to make known, the truth about the Watergate burglary and the cover-up attempt.

But look at the thing in context. The transcripts show that on March 21, during a discussion of various ideas for dealing with the Watergate Committee, the grand jury and what to do if E. Howard Hunt should spill his guts to Judge Sirica, the President did propose that Dean prepare a written report.

But the President made clear that he wanted a report "which is very general, understand. . . that where specifics are concerned, make it very general, your investigation of the case." And the reason for the general report was made clear a bit later by

Ehrlichman: "The President is in a stronger position later if he can be shown to have justifiably relied on you at this point in time."

The next day, the President again made clear the sort of report he wanted: "You could write it in a way that you say this report was not comment on et cetera, et cetera, but I have reviewed the record, Mr. President, and without at all compromising the rights of defendants and so forth, some of whom are on appeal, here are the facts with regard to members of the White House staff, et cetera, et cetera that you asked me about. . . ."

Does that sound like an order to launch an investigation and make an impartial report? Or does it sound like a ploy to indicate that the President knew less than he in fact did?

Similarly, the order to Kleindienst to report to the President any evidence of White House involvement, comes off in the Burch article as a determination on the part of the President to deal firmly with any miscreants on his staff.

But in a March 28 telephone call, Ehrlichman tells Kleindienst: "Okay, now, the President said for me to say this to you. That the best information he had is that neither Dean nor Haldeman nor (Charles) Colson nor I nor anybody in the White House had any prior knowledge of this burglary. He said that he's counting on you to provide him with any information to the contrary if it ever turns up. . . ."

Earlier in that same conversation, in a discussion of what to do about Sen. Lowell Weicker, who had been asking tough questions during the Senate Watergate hearings, the Attorney General gives a clue as to his impartiality: "We just might not want to alienate him," says Kleindienst. ". . . I think in the long run, we might need this guy's vote."

Question: Was this an effort to "get the truth out," or was it an effort on the part of the President to keep informed, so he could keep himself clear of the scandal?

As to the resignations of his top aides, the transcripts make unmistakable what was clear all along: that the ousters were not punishment for wrongdoing but a public relations gambit calculated to take the pressure off the President, by giving the illusion that he was taking forthright action.

Burch read the transcripts and reached an "obvious" conclusion: "The President had no prior knowledge of the break-in nor any part in its cover-up."

I read the same thing and reach a conclusion that seems at least as obvious: The President might not have known about the cover-up until March 21. But after that, he became an integral part of it.