

Nixon and the

By Carl Bernstein
and Bob Woodward
Washington Post

Washington

The House Judiciary Committee's transcript of the recorded White House Watergate conversations reveals that, as early as March 13, 1973, President Nixon apparently took the initiative in concealing the facts of Watergate from government investigators.

On March 13 — eight days before Mr. Nixon has insisted he first learned of the Watergate coverup — the President engaged in the following dialogue with then White House counsel John W. Dean III, according to the transcript released by the Judiciary Committee yesterday:

"Well, what about the

hang-out thing?" Mr. Nixon asked Dean, employing the "hang-out" euphemism used synonymously in the White House with "letting it all hang out" or "telling the truth."

The President, who moments earlier had been told by Dean that White House aide Gordon Strachan had known about the Watergate bugging operation in advance, continued:

"Uh, is it too late to, to, frankly, go the hang-out road? Yes it is," Mr. Nixon stated in answer to his own question.

The earlier White House transcript of this same conversation did not include Mr. Nixon's phrase "yes, it is," and instead showed John Dean — not the President — initially rejecting the

option of following the "hang-out road."

According to the Judiciary committee transcript, the President's words "Yes, it is" were followed by this dialogue in which Dean agreed it was too late for the hang-out road and the President again rejected the idea even more explicitly:

Dean: "I think it is. I think — here's the — The hang-out road —"

President: "The hang-out road's going to have to be rejected. I, some, I understand it was rejected."

In the White House version of the same conversation, the President's last statement is characterized as "inaudible" after the words "The hang-out road . . ."

The difference could prove

significant in the Judiciary Committee's impeachment inquiry because the committee's version implies the President already knew as of March 13, 1973, that the option of cooperating with federal investigators had been foreclosed.

There is no clear indication in either the White House or the committee's versions of who might have earlier rejected the option of full disclosure.

For the past 15 months, Mr. Nixon has consistently maintained that he first learned of the Watergate coverup on March 21, 1973, when he and Dean discussed the matter in the Oval office for almost two hours.

The White House version of the March 13 conversation had already undermined Mr.

'Hang-out Road'

Nixon's position because of its disclosure that Dean told the President on that date of Strachan's alleged foreknowledge of the Watergate bugging operation.

But, until yesterday's release of the Judiciary Committee's transcript, there had been no strong indication that the President might have already taken an active, decision-making role in the Watergate coverup as early as March 13.

The March 13 conversation took place against the backdrop of White House plans, involving Mr. Nixon, for a then-upcoming investigation and intensified inquiry by FBI and Justice Department investigators.

Both versions of the March 13 meeting show the President as observing, "I

suppose we can't call that justice, can we?" when told by Dean that Strachan had already lied twice to federal investigators.

However, in the Judiciary Committee version Dean tells the President of Strachan: "He'll go in and stonewall it and say, 'I don't know anything about what you are talking about.' He has already done it twice, as you know, in interviews (with federal investigators)."

In the White House version of the same statement, Dean presents Strachan's future "stonewalling" as an option — not something already decided upon — and does not so clearly indicate that Mr. Nixon might have already known of earlier alleged lying by Strachan. The White House version quotes Dean as follows:

"He can go in and stonewall and say, 'I don't know anything about what you are talking about.' He has already done it twice you know, in interviews."

The Judiciary Committee version of the March 13 conversation contains other examples of key statements either not contained in the White House transcript or showing the President in a less favorable light than his own transcript.

In one instance, according to the Judiciary Committee version: "A lot of people around here had knowledge that something was going on over there," referring to the President's re-election committee. The statement is missing entirely from the edited White House transcript.

At another point in the Judiciary Committee transcript, the President said that Haldeman "must have known about" Donald H. Segretti, a California attorney who was a paid political saboteur on behalf of the President's re-election. There is no comparable statement in the White House transcripts.

Other portions not contained in the White House transcripts indicate that the President might have thought former Attorney General John N. Mitchell knew about the Watergate bugging in advance.

In both versions, Dean says in reference to Mitchell that "I don't think he knew it was there." P. 149

But only in the Judiciary Committee version does the President reply: "You kidding?"