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Transcript Differs on Nixon

Cover-up

By Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward

Washington Post Staff Writers

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 cover-up—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 Presi-

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Hush Money

By Lawrence Meyer

Washington Post Staff Writer

The House Judiciary Committee's transcript of the critical March 21, 1973, meeting between President Nixon and White House counsel John W. Dean III appears to provide the most damaging version yet made public of Mr. Nixon's attitude toward the payment of "hush money" to Watergate conspirator E. Howard Hunt Jr.

The Judiciary Committee transcript, which differs in significant respects from the edited White House transcript of the March 21 meeting, shows Mr. Nixon as more of an advocate of making the payment to Hunt.

The Judiciary Committee transcript shows President Nixon, when discussing the possibility of meeting Hunt's demand for money, as saying, "... his price is pretty high, but at least, uh, we *should*, we *should* buy the time on that, uh, as I pointed out to John" (emphasis added).

In the White House version of the same conversation, Mr. Nixon was quoted as saying "... his price is pretty high, but at least we *can* buy the time on that..."

At another point, the Judiciary Committee transcript shows Mr. Nixon returning the discussion to the subject of the money: "But let's now come back to the money, a million dollars, and so forth and so on. Let me say that I think you *could* get that *in*

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dent—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 ruled out the idea even more explicitly:

Dean: “I think it is. I think—Here's the—The hangout 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 version 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 cover-up 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 conversa-

tion had already undermined Mr. 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 by the Senate Watergate Committee and an 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 possible future “stonewall-

ing” 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, Dean told the President: “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.

Later in the conversation, the President asked Dean if any information was obtained from the Watergate bugging operation.

In the White House version, the President replied that H.R. Haldeman, then the White House chief of staff, “one time said something to me about something, this or that or something.”

In the Judiciary Committee version, the President says that Haldeman “one time said something about the fact we got some information about this . . .”—apparently indicating some knowledge of cover—information-gathering efforts.

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 transcript.

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 Mit-

chell, “I don't think he knew it was there.”

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

In the White House version, the President said, “I don't think that Mitchell knew about this sort of thing.”

But in the Judiciary Committee version, the President seems incredulous when Dean suggests Mitchell didn't know, and states: “You don't think Mitchell knew about this thing?”

In an earlier conversation between Dean and the President on Feb. 28, 1973, there is also a significant difference between the White House and Judiciary Committee versions.

It was at this meeting that the subject of executive clemency for the Watergate

The two transcript versions are almost identical on the President's question about clemency. In the Judiciary Committee version it is: “What the hell do they expect, though? Do they expect that they will get clemency within a reasonable time?”

But the White House version shows no response by Dean. In the Judiciary Committee version, Dean responds: “I think they do. (Unintelligible) going to do.” This is an indication that the President was aware of such expectations by the Watergate burglars.

Only the President is empowered by law to grant executive clemency, but in neither version does he inquire how the burglars came to expect such grants of clemency.

learned that payments had been made prior to the time that the demand for blackmail by Mr. Hunt—alleged demand for blackmail. I should say, since it has not yet been tried—that payments had been made for the purpose of keeping defendants still. I should have said they were alleged to have been made because as a matter of fact those who were alleged to have made payments to defendants for their defense fees and for their support . . . all have denied that that was the case. They have said it was only for the support of the defendants and only for their attorneys' fees, which would be completely proper."

The Judiciary Committee transcript of the March 21st meeting, however, shows Mr. Nixon with an apparent sense of urgency and as an advocate of meeting Hunt's demand for money, which Dean reported to him that day. The Judiciary Committee transcript contains differences in words and entire passages that give a sharper definition of Mr. Nixon's position regarding the payment of money to the Watergate defendants.

The Judiciary Committee version quotes Mr. Nixon as referring to the "present demand" from Hunt, in contrast to the White House version quoting Mr. Nixon as referring to the "present finance" of Hunt. The Judiciary version thus gives the impression that Mr. Nixon understood that the money Hunt was seeking was blackmail rather than mere financial assistance.

The Judiciary Committee transcript quotes Mr. Nixon as saying to Dean: "But at the moment, don't you agree that you'd better get the Hunt thing? I mean, that's worth it, at the moment."

The White House version quotes Mr. Nixon as saying, "But at the moment, don't you agree it is better to get the Hunt thing that's where that . . ."

Later, when the conversation returned to meeting Hunt's demand for \$120,000, the Judiciary Committee again reflects a difference with the White House transcript.

In the Judiciary Committee version, Mr. Nixon is quoted saying, "Would you agree that that's a buy time thing, you better damn well get that done, but fast?"

The White House version,

omitting the words "but fast" quoted Mr. Nixon as saying, "Would you agree that that's the prime thing that you damn well better get that done?"

The Judiciary Committee version also appears to show that Mr. Nixon was sensitive to the difficulties in getting money to the Watergate defendants without leaving any trail.

"Well, the main point, now is the people who will need the money (unintelligible)," Mr. Nixon is quoted as saying in the Judiciary Committee version. "Well of course, you've got the surplus from the campaign. That we have to account for. But if there's any other money hanging around . . ."

The White House version again is different: "Well, of course you have a surplus from the campaign. Is there any other money hanging around?" The White House version does not contain the sentence, "That we have to account for," an apparent reference to federal law requiring an accounting of how money from the 1972 Nixon presidential campaign was spent.

At another point, Mr. Nixon is quoted in the Judiciary Committee transcript as referring to the likelihood that Hunt will "squeal." The White House transcript reflects no such statement.

In discussing with Dean what might be revealed, the Judiciary Committee transcript shows Mr. Nixon taking a stronger position than that reflected in the White House transcripts.

"And that means, we got to, we've got to keep it off of you, uh, which I, which I (unintelligible) obstruction of justice thing," the Judiciary Committee transcript quotes Mr. Nixon as saying.

In the White House version, Mr. Nixon was quoted as saying, "And that means keeping off you."

At another point, Mr. Nixon discussed the possibility of using a cover story that a Cuban committee in Miami provided funds to the Watergate defendants.

The Judiciary Committee version quotes Mr. Nixon as asserting, "As far as what happened up to this time, our cover there is just going to be the Cuban committee did this for them up through the election."

In the White House version, Mr. Nixon was quoted as asking, "These fellows though, as far as what has happened up to this time, are covered on their situation,

because the Cuban committee did this for them during the election?"

In a broader context of the Watergate coverup, the Judiciary Committee's transcript also reflects differences damaging to Mr. Nixon.

At one point, the conversation between Mr. Nixon and Dean turned to the possibility of criminal cases being developed against White House chief of staff H. R. (Bob) Haldeman, top presidential domestic adviser John D. Ehrlichman or former Attorney General John N. Mitchell.

The Judiciary Committee version quotes Mr. Nixon as saying, "Well if it really comes down to that, we cannot, maybe—we'd have to shed it in order to contain it again."

In the White House version, Mr. Nixon stated, "If it really comes down to that we would have to (unintelligible) some of the men."

In discussing the appearance of his aides before the federal grand jury investigating the Watergate affair, the White House version quoted Mr. Nixon as advising, "But you can say I don't remember."

In the Judiciary committee version, Mr. Nixon gives a direction: "Just be damned sure you say I don't remember . . ."

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cash, and I know money is hard, but there are ways."

The White House transcript quoted Mr. Nixon as saying, "I just have a feeling on it. Well, it sounds like a lot of money, a million dollars. Let my (sic) say that I think we could get that. I know money is hard to raise."

The March 21 meeting between Dean and Mr. Nixon was the first time, according to both Dean and Mr. Nixon, that Mr. Nixon was given a full account of the Watergate coverup. Mr. Nixon has provided a number of different, and sometimes conflicting, accounts of what Dean told him during that meeting.

Mr. Nixon said in a formal statement released Aug. 15, 1973, that, "I was only told (on March 21) that the money had been used for attorney's fees and family support, not that it had been paid to procure silence from the recipients."

On March 6, 1974, during a press conference, Mr. Nixon contradicted his earlier statement. "And for the first time," Mr. Nixon said, "on March 21 he (Dean) told me that payments had been made to defendants for the purpose of keeping them quiet, not simply for their defense."

When Mr. Nixon was asked on March 19 to explain the contradiction, he replied that his March 6 statement "was incorrect insofar as it said that I