

President Nixon's

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During that intense week in March, 1973 when President Nixon was fully briefed on the extent of the Watergate problem, his actions and words appear to have been aimed at continuing a cover-up, according to evidence compiled by the House Judiciary Committee.

Repeatedly, the evidence suggests, Mr. Nixon sought ways to continue to contain the scandal and keep the truth from investigators, while at no point did he ever suggest that his aides disclose all they knew to appropriate authorities.

The President's own words at several points during that week beginning March 13 indicate his admiration for those subordinates who were successfully "stonewalling" efforts to learn the truth. His scorn, conversely, appears to have been aimed at those aides threatening to buckle under the pressure.

Thus, having been informed that presidential assistant Gordon Strachan twice lied to federal investigators by denying any knowledge of the Watergate bugging operation, Mr. Nixon dictated the following observation into a tape recorder on March 21:

"It seems that Strachan has been a real, uh, courageous fellow through all this."

In the same dictabelt recording, Mr. Nixon seemed far less pleased with the actions of Jeb Stuart Magruder, who at the time was threatening to drag White House chief of staff H. R. Haldeman into the Watergate quagmire:

"Uh, the Haldeman selection on Magruder (to head the day-to-day operations of the President's re-election committee) is still a very hard one for me to figure out . . . He picked a rather weak man, who had all the appearance of character, but who really lacks it when the, uh, chips are down."

Earlier that day, the President and his counsel, John W. Dean III, had discussed the blackmail demands of Watergate burglar E. Howard Hunt, who was threatening to reveal the secrets of the White House "plumbers" unit unless he was paid to remain silent.

" . . . the, uh, very great danger (is) that somebody like H- Hunt is going to blow," Mr. Nixon matter-of-factly dictated into his tape recorder that evening. A few moments later, discussing

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the plumbers' assault on the files of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist, the President noted that White House deputy Egil Krogh Jr. had lied to the Watergate grand jury.

" . . . Apparently Krogh has a problem here because Krogh did answer one question to the effect that he did not know the Cubans, which, of course, puts him in a straight position of perjury," the President dictated.

"This of course would be a terrible tragedy because Krogh, us, was involved in national security work at the time, had nothing whatever to do with Watergate and the whole Ellsberg business . . ."

Both in meeting with his aides that day, and in dictating his recollections later, Mr. Nixon seemed most concerned with finding a way to keep Hunt silent while at the same time seeking additional ways to protect presidential aides from criminal liability.

For example, around midday, he and Dean discussed the possibility of establishing a special grand jury which could be controlled by the White House and which would confer immunity from prosecution to presidential aides.

By nightfall, however, Mr. Nixon had apparently rejected the idea as too risky:

"It seemed to me in my talk with Dean that the idea of a grand jury had, uh, much to, uh, be said for it," the President dictated.

"Yet after he, Haldeman and Ehrlichman had met they came back and said they'd been around the track and felt that that would be a mistake. Ehrlichman did not feel, for example, that a grand jury or some sort of special panel . . . would be able to grant immunity."

Between 5:20 and 6:01 p.m. that day, Mr. Nixon and his aides had met in the Oval Office and discussed five basic alternatives developed during the afternoon that would avoid full and truthful disclosure.

Dictating his thoughts into the recorder shortly afterward, the President suggested no other alternative to the five remedies: by passing the existing Watergate grand jury through a special panel; granting a pardon or executive clemency to Howard Hunt; meeting Hunt's blackmail demands; having Dean prepare a written report that, in Mr. Nixon's words, would be "very general" because, "Understand, I don't want to get all that God damned specific," and convincing former Attorney General John Mitchell step forward to make a partial disclosure. ("What the hell is he going to disclose that isn't going to blow something?" Mr. Nixon asked his aides, thus ending the discussion of that alternative.)

Recounting the discussions into the dictaphone, Mr. Nixon observed that evening:

"Dean . . . has to warn against every loose end that might come out, particularly in view of some of the things that have come out up to this point. They are going to meet with Mitchell in the morning, and I uh, hope that Mitchell will really put his mind to this thing and perhaps out of it all can come so—some sort of a

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Sketch by David Suter for The Washington Post

course of action we can follow. Uh, it seems to me just to hunker down without making any kind of statement is really, uh, too dangerous as far as the President . . ."

The next day, from 1:57 to 3:43 p.m., Mr. Nixon met with Dean, Ehrlichman, Haldeman and Mitchell.

Neither the Watergate grand jury nor the House Judiciary Committee was provided a complete tape recording by the President of that meeting. They were given only the beginning. But, later, by means still not clear, the Judiciary Committee obtained a copy of the full, original White House tape of the session.

"I don't give a shit what happens," the President told John Mitchell in the end portion of the meeting. "I want you all to stonewall it, let them plead the Fifth Amendment, cover-up or anything else, if it'll save it — save the plan. That's the whole point."

And that's the whole point.