

"Stay to Hell Out of This"

The evidence that finally convinced Richard Nixon's lawyer, his intimate aides and his hard-core congressional supporters that he had been involved in the Watergate cover-up was contained in three transcripts that he released to the public last week, along with a statement that "portions of the tapes of these . . . conversations are at variance with certain of my previous statements." The extraordinarily revealing transcripts were of conversations that he had held with H.R. Haldeman, then White House chief of staff, on June 23, 1972, just six days after the Watergate break-in. The most incriminating portions of those talks:

FIRST MEETING (10:04-11:39 a.m.)

HALDEMAN: Now, on the investigation, you know the Democratic break-in thing, we're back in the problem area because the FBI is not under control, because [Acting FBI Director L. Patrick] Gray doesn't exactly know how to control it and they have—their investigation is now leading into some productive areas—because they've been able to trace the money—not through the money itself—but through the bank sources—the banker. And, and it goes in some directions we don't want it to go. . . [Nixon Campaign Chairman John N.] Mitchell came up with yesterday, and [then White House Counsel] John Dean analyzed very carefully last night and concludes, concurs now with Mitchell's rec-

ommendation that the only way to solve this, and we're set up beautifully to do it, ah, in that . . . That the way to handle this now is for us to have [Deputy CIA Director Vernon] Walters call Pat Gray and just say "Stay to hell out of this—this is, ah, business here we don't want you to go any further on it." That's not an unusual development, and ah, that would take care of it.

PRESIDENT: What about Pat Gray—you mean Pat Gray doesn't want to?

H: Pat does want to. He doesn't know how to, and he doesn't have, he doesn't have any basis for doing it. Given this, he will then have the basis. He'll call [then Deputy Associate FBI Director] Mark Felt in, and the two of them—and Mark Felt wants to cooperate because he's ambitious—

P: Yeah.

H: He'll call him in and say, "We've got the signal from across the river [the CIA] to put the hold on this." And that will fit rather well because the FBI agents who are working the case, at this point, feel that's what it is.

P: This is CIA? They've traced the money? Who'd they trace it to?

H: Well, they've traced it to a name, but they haven't gotten to the guy yet.

P: Would it be somebody here?

H: [Republicans' Midwestern Finance Chairman] Ken Dahlberg.

P: Who the hell is Ken Dahlberg?

H: He gave \$25,000 in Minnesota and,

ah, the check went directly to this guy [Watergate Burglar Bernard] Barker.

P: It isn't from the committee, though, from [Nixon Campaign Finance Director Maurice H.] Stans?

H: Yeah. It is. It's directly traceable and there's some more through some Texas people that went to the Mexican bank, which can also be traced to the Mexican bank—they'll get their names today.

P: Well, I mean, there's no way—I'm just thinking if they don't cooperate, what do they say? That they were approached by the Cubans [the Watergate burglars]. That's what Dahlberg has to say, the Texans too, that they—

H: Well, if they will. But then we're relying on more and more people all the time. That's the problem, and they'll stop if we could take this other route.

P: All right.

H: And you seem to think the thing to do is get them to stop?

P: Right, fine.

H: They say the only way to do that is from White House instructions. And it's got to be to [CIA Director Richard] Helms and to—ah, what's his name . . . ? Walters.

P: Walters.

H: And the proposal would be that [then Domestic Adviser John] Ehrlichman and I call them in, and say, ah—

P: All right, fine. How do you call him in—I mean you just—well, we protected Helms from one hell of a lot of things.

H: That's what Ehrlichman says.

P: Of course, this Hunt, that will un-

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cover a lot of things. You open that scab, there's a hell of a lot of things, and we just feel that it would be very detrimental to have this thing go any further. This involves these Cubans, Hunt and a lot of hanky-panky that we have nothing to do with ourselves. Well, what the hell, did Mitchell know about this?

H: I think so. I don't think he knew the details, but I think he knew.

P: He didn't know how it was going to be handled, though—with Dahlberg and the Texans and so forth? Well, who was the asshole that did? Is it Liddy? Is that the fellow? He must be a little nuts.

H: He is.

P: I mean he just isn't well screwed on, is he? Is that the problem?

H: No, but he was under pressure, apparently, to get more information, and as he got more pressure, he pushed the people harder to move harder—

P: Pressure from Mitchell?

H: Apparently.

P: All right, fine, I understand it all. We won't second-guess Mitchell and the rest. Thank God it wasn't [Presidential Counsel Charles W.] Colson.

H: The FBI interviewed Colson yesterday. They determined that would be a good thing to do. To have him take an interrogation, which he did, and that—the FBI guys working the case concluded that there were one or two possibilities—one, that this is a White House—they don't think that there is anything at the election committee—they think it was either a White House operation and they had some obscure reasons for it—nonpo-

litical, or it was a—Cuban and the CIA. And after their interrogation of Colson yesterday, they concluded it was not the White House, but are now convinced it is a CIA thing, so the CIA turnoff would—

P: Well, not sure of their analysis, I'm not going to get that involved. I'm (unintelligible).

H: No, sir, we don't want you to.

P: You call them in.

H: Good deal.

P: Play it tough. That's the way they play it, and that's the way we are going to play it.

H: O.K. . . .

P: When you get in . . . say, Look, the problem is that this will open the whole, the whole Bay of Pigs thing, and the President just feels that, ah, without going into the details—don't, don't lie to them to the extent to say no involvement, but just say this is a comedy of errors, without getting into it, the President believes that it is going to open the whole Bay of Pigs thing up again. And, ah, because these people are plugging for (unintelligible) and that they should call the FBI in and (unintelligible) don't go any further into this case period! . . . Well, can you get it done?

H: I think so.

SECOND MEETING (1:04-1:13 p.m.)

P: O.K. . . . just say (unintelligible) very bad to have this fellow Hunt, ah, he knows too damned much, if he was involved—you happen to know that? If it gets out that this is all involved, the Cuba thing, it would be a fiasco. It would make

the CIA look bad, it's going to make Hunt look bad, and it is likely to blow the whole Bay of Pigs thing, which we think would be very unfortunate—both for [the] CIA, and for the country, at this time, and for American foreign policy. Just tell him [presumably FBI Director Gray] to lay off. Don't you?

H: Yep. That's the basis to do it on. Just leave it at that.

THIRD MEETING (2:20-2:45 p.m.)

H: Well, it was kind of interest[ing]. Walters made the point and I didn't mention Hunt, I just said that the thing was leading into directions that were going to create potential problems because they were exploring leads that led back into areas that would be harmful to the CIA and harmful to the Government . . . Gray called and said, yesterday, and said that he thought—

P: Who did? Gray?

H: Gray called Helms and said I think we've run right into the middle of a CIA covert operation.

P: Gray said that?

H: Yeah . . . So at that point he [Helms or Walters] kind of got the picture. He said, he said we'll be very happy to be helpful (unintelligible) handle anything you want. I would like to know the reason for being helpful, and I made it clear to him he wasn't going to get explicit (unintelligible) generality, and he said fine. And Walters (unintelligible). Walters is going to make a call to Gray. That's the way we put it and that's the way it was left.

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