

Nixon Devised Early Plan for His Protection

Tapes Show Cover-up in April, 1973

By George Lardner Jr.
Washington Post Staff Writer

Warned that he might have committed a crime, Richard M. Nixon decided in April of 1973 to "put the wagons up around the President" and devised a story to protect himself in the Watergate scandal.

A new set of White House tapes, made public for the first time, at the Watergate cover-up trial yesterday, showed that Mr. Nixon realized he himself was in serious jeopardy because of what he had told White House counsel John Dean III the month before, on March 21, 1973.

"... I have got to put the wagons up around the President on this particular conversation," Mr. Nixon said. "I just wonder if the son-of-a-bitch had a tape recorder on him."

The President acknowledged the incriminating evidence against him after reviewing it at length with White House chief of staff H. R. (Bob) Haldeman, who had just listened to Mr. Nixon's secret recording of the Dean conversation.

Haldeman reminded the President that he had been told of Watergate spy E. Howard Hunt's "blackmail" demands and that Mr. Nixon had, in turn, responded: "We've got to keep the cap on the bottle that much, at least."

"You said, 'either that or let it all blow right now,'" Haldeman told the President in reciting from the extensive notes that he made.

Serving up one quotation after another, Haldeman reported that Mr. Nixon had also discussed "the problem of Hunt's clemency" with Dean,

only to be warned by Dean that this might not be feasible.

"He [Dean] said, 'It may involve—it may further involve you in this,'" Haldeman continued on the explosive tape about a tape. "And you said, 'Yes, and it's wrong.'"

Actually, Mr. Nixon had told Dean simply, "No, it's wrong, that's for sure," when the White House counsel warned him against further involvement.

Haldeman followed up on that inaccuracy about the crucial phrase by going on to coach Mr. Nixon on the line he might take. He suggested that the President could say he was simply drawing Dean out, trying to find out what was going on.

"It's not a good story," Mr. Nixon said unhappily, but he agreed that it seemed to be

See TRIAL, A18, Col. 1

TRIAL, From A1

the "best we can" come up with. Then he hesitated again.

After all, the President observed, "I said, well, that's—we gotta keep the cap on it. We can get the money, huh?"

The talk about clemency, and especially his own remark, "You couldn't do it till after the '74 elections," bothered Mr. Nixon, too.

"That's an incriminating thing," he said, and then added in broken phrases that it would be Dean's word "against the President's" unless he had a "tape recorder in his pocket."

Haldeman offered a rationale. "At this point, you're, you're investigating," he told the President. "You're smoking him out on what he thinks the alternatives are."

The President: "Yeah."

Haldeman: "You're pumping him."

The President: "Yeah."

Back and forth it went. The two men kept at it for almost an hour. Mr. Nixon had also told Dean that it would be "worthwhile" to raise up to \$1

million if that is what the original Watergate defendants ultimately need. Recapping the sore spots, the President said at one point:

"... Uh, we discussed the, the money situation, raising the money... I said, 'That's wrong, didn't I? Oh, wrong on clemency.'"

The President had accurately corrected himself, but Haldeman turned him around again.

"No," the White House chief of staff asserted, "you said getting the money was wrong."

"Hmm?" the President asked in a puzzled tone.

Haldeman: "You said, that, that approach would be wrong..."

Mr. Nixon: "Yeah."

Haldeman: "... Trying to get the money. No, because I don't think you felt that clemency was wrong. I think you felt that you had some justification for clemency on Hunt... because of his family... Actually you'd talked about it for all of them (the defendants) because, because the people, they really are being screwed."

Mr. Nixon: "Right."

By now, Haldeman had also reminded the President that former Attorney General John N. Mitchell told Dean, Haldeman, and former White House aide John D. Ehrlichman on March 22, 1973, that Hunt was no longer "a problem." (A

messenger dispatched by Nixon campaign deputy Frederick C. LaRue had delivered some \$75,000 in cash to Hunt's lawyer, William O. Bittman, the night before.)

Emphasizing the "we," Mr. Nixon expressed relief to Haldeman that "We didn't furnish any money, thank God."

"Remember," the President then reminded his chief of staff, "I told you later that I could get a hundred thousand"

"That rings a bell," Haldeman agreed, "'cause you talked about Rose having some money—for something. I remember that."

The allusion may have been to the President's personal secretary, Rose Mary Woods, but there was no further mention of "Rose" that could be heard on the recording.

The meeting finally broke up with Mr. Nixon still preoccupied with how much Dean was going to tell government prosecutors, still perplexed over the thought that he might have had a tape recorder with him at the crucial March 21 meeting.

The White House counsel

had once suggested a fallback strategy of "drawing the wagons around the White House" and abandoning everyone else involved in the cover-up. Now

Mr. Nixon borrowed the wild-west metaphor.

"Let's not drag up, (unintelligible) the wagons, up around the White House," he told Haldeman. "Let me say it's got to be you, Ehrlichman, and I have got to put the wagons up around the President on this particular conversation. I just wonder if the son-of-a-bitch had a tape recorder on him. I didn't notice any, but I wasn't looking. . ."

Haldeman said he thought this "almost inconceivable" and, at that point, the President and his chief of staff acknowledged between them that Dean had simply been trying to alert Mr. Nixon on March 21 of the growing problems the White House faced.

"He was really coming in, in fact, to warn me," Mr. Nixon said.

Haldeman agreed. "He (Dean) had no thought that you were going to say anything like this," the White House aide told the President. "All he was coming in to tell you was that there was a problem. He wasn't expecting you to solve it, uh, uh, solve it that way. I think you probably surprised him by, by even raising this point."

At first, Mr. Nixon didn't seem to know what point Haldeman was talking about. "What, what?" he asked.

Haldeman: "Of, you know, well, we could get the money. . . I think that the last thing he expected you to say."

"What did he expect me to say, we can't do it?" the President replied with a touch of annoyance.

The tape and three others played yesterday as part of the prosecution's case were the most damaging new evidence against Mr. Nixon that have come to light at the cover-up trial of five former Nixon aides. None of the tapes was made public last April when he released the censored transcripts of dozens of other Watergate conversations with the claim that they told the full story.

President Ford has already pardoned Mr. Nixon for any

crimes he may have committed while in office.

Submitted by Watergate prosecutors as the climax of their case the latest tapes show apprehension on Mr. Nixon's part after learning in mid-April that "that goddam Dean," as the President put it, had decided to jump ship.

Apparently speaking to reassure Mr. Nixon, Ehrlichman told him on April 19, 1973, that he would surely be on sound ground if he said that his suspicions had been really aroused by Dean's failure—after the March 21 meeting—to come up with a report on the Watergate scandal.

"That's when he (Dean) was uncovered," Ehrlichman suggested.

"I suppose that really isn't

true," Mr. Nixon replied and then began mulling over his growing problems.

"We generally are hurting ourselves in this cause," the President said. "I guess we just haven't been hard enough, have we? . . . but God Almighty, we weren't protecting the White House now, right? . . . we weren't protecting that, we're protecting John Mitchell."

Ehrlichman said that was exactly right. "In the first instance we were protecting your re-election in a sense," the White House aide declared. "We didn't know what from."

The President: "That's right."

Ehrlichman: "Afterwards, though, this cover-up business was pure Mitchell."

The outlook seemed even darker six days later as President Nixon and aides Haldeman and Ehrlichman met for more than two hours. Ehrlichman warned Mr. Nixon that Dean might be "totally out of control" and that "if matters are not handled adroitly. . . you could get a resolution of impeachment."

Elaborating on the point, the White House domestic adviser added: "I don't know if you've thought of this or not, but I got thinking about it last night, uh, on the ground that you committed a crime. . . uh, and that there is no other legal process available to, uh, the United States people other than. . . other than impeachment."