

Watergate

How Nixon Tells It -- In His Memoirs

Washington

Former President Nixon says he was completely surprised when he learned of the break-in at Democratic National Headquarters in the Watergate office building in June, 1972.

Nixon, in a published excerpt from his forthcoming book "RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon," says he knew nothing about the break-in on June 17 until he read about it the next morning when he returned to Key Biscayne from a brief trip to Grand Cayman, a small island in the Bahamas owned by his friend Bob Abplanalp.

"When I got to my house I could smell coffee brewing in the kitchen, and I went in to get a cup," Nixon recalls. "There was a Miami Herald on the counter.

"On the front page was a small story headlined: 'Miamians Held in D.C. Try to Bug Demo Headquarters.' ... They (those arrested) had all been wearing rubber surgical gloves. It sounded preposterous: Cubans in surgical gloves bugging the DNC! I dismissed it as some sort of prank," Nixon says.

On the day after the break-in, Nixon says, he flew back to Washington on Air Force One and that night, June 18, 1972, made an entry in his diary about some "disturbing news from Bob Haldeman" that had been conveyed to him in mid-air.

"... John Mitchell (former chairman of CRP, the Committee to Re-Elect the President, and former attorney general) had told Bob on the phone enigmatically not to get involved in it..."

The excerpt does not indicate whether Nixon or Haldeman demanded any more information from Mitchell. Nixon then goes on to say that Haldeman "had also heard that the money found on the arrested men — over \$1000 in bills — had apparently come from the CRP."

The former President, in the first in the series of published statements, shows no interest in finding out how such payments could have been made. He moves on, instead, to a June 20, 1972, meeting with White House aide Charles W. Colson, who "figured that the break-in might have been something the Cubans organized on their own."

Nixon, by his account, agreed. "I told Colson we were just going to leave the Watergate matter where it was, with the Cubans."

The former President acknowledges that he told Haldeman (on June 23, 1972) to have the CIA "call the FBI and say that for the sake of the country they should go no further into this case." Nixon says he acquiesced in the plan to have CIA Deputy Director Vernon Walters instruct acting FBI Director Patrick Gray: "Stay the hell out of this."

"As far as I was concerned," Nixon writes, "this was the end of our worries about Watergate." The former President says nothing, in the first excerpt, about Gray telling White House counsel John W. Dean III the previous evening that five checks for the Nixon election cam-

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aign had been cashed by Watergate burglar Bernard Barker. The former President also says nothing, in this installment, of Gray's inclination — the night before the CIA was ordered to tell Gray to stay out of it — to think that the Watergate bugging had indeed been "a CIA operation."

By Nixon's account, this was a perfectly proper notion. According to his memoirs, the CRP money found on the burglars never entered his mind again.

The first excerpt of the memoirs, in short, appears to add very little to the public record and, in fact, glosses over much of it. It does, however, give some fascinating

glimpses of what Nixon says was running through his mind during the crucial episodes that led to the first presidential resignation in American history.

Nixon provides compelling detail about the April 15, 1973, meeting he had with Attorney General Richard Kleindienst, and the head of the Justice Department's criminal justice division, Henry Petersen.

"Kleindienst had found Petersen cleaning his boat. Brought him straight to the White House, dressed in a smudged T-shirt, tennis shoes and jeans."

Petersen thought Haldeman and Erlichman should resign. Nixon says he knew, instinctively, that they would have to go, even though he realized by now that he himself was subject to the same accusations dogging his chief aides.

"I told myself that I had not been involved in the things that gave them criminal vulnerability," Nixon writes. "But there were things that I had known I had talked with Colson about clemency (for the Watergate burglars) ... and I had been aware that attorneys' fees and family support were going to the defendants."

Nixon does not say when he became aware of such payments. It had always been a big issue at the coverup trial, especially in light of a Nov. 14, 1972, memo composed by Watergate burglar E. Howard Hunt and his wife, Dorothy.

The Hunt memo warned that "half measures will be unacceptable," if the Watergate defendants were expected to remain silent. The memo protested that "the administration was still 'deficient in living up to its commitments,' to wit: '1. Financial Support. 2. Legal Defense Fees. 3. Pardons. 4. Rehabilitation.'"

Nixon had always insisted that he considered clemency only for Hunt and then only because of Mrs. Hunt's accidental death in an air crash in Chicago.

The airliner, however, did not crash until Dec. 8, 1972, more than three weeks after the Hunt memo. The memo prompted a \$40,000 payment, again about a week before the plane went down.

In effect convicted of complicity more than three years ago as an unindicted co-conspirator in a conspiracy to obstruct justice, the former President says:

"I was faced with having to fire my friends for things I myself was a part of. I was selfish enough about my own survival to want them to leave; but I was not so ruthless as to be able to confront easily the idea of hurting people I cared about so deeply. I worried more about the impact on them if they were forced to leave, but I worried more about the impact on me if they didn't."

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