

Scott Finds Self in Credibility Bind

Still Confident Tapes Will Uphold Nixon

By Spencer Rich

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Hugh Scott, the shrewd and engaging Senate Republican leader, has plunged himself into the most serious credibility crisis of his entire Senate career by his outspoken defense of the President in the dispute over the Watergate cover-up.

It could eventually injure his ability to lead the party and threaten his leadership position, unless his assertions are proved correct.

Scott in recent weeks has repeatedly asserted that he has seen summaries and partial transcripts of White House tapes which, according to Scott, prove that former White House counsel John W. Dean III lied when he said President Nixon knew of the Watergate cover-up before last March 21.

Repeating earlier statements that he has no intention of letting the White House mislead him and make him a "patsy," Scott said yesterday, "I'm not backtracking one single inch" from earlier statements that Dean lied and is guilty of perjury and that the White House tapes prove it.

Scott's statements have subjected his credibility to the most severe questioning

on Capitol Hill. Not one single other member of Congress has come forward to say that he has seen the summaries and transcripts of the Sept. 15, 1972, Feb. 28, 1973, and March 13, 1973, tapes that Scott says prove Mr. Nixon innocent in the cover-up.

When other members of Congress are asked about

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the matter, they say they haven't seen any such documents, haven't asked for them and don't want to get involved in the controversy.

At the same time, the White House has steadfastly declined to back up Scott's statements by making the summaries and transcripts public, despite Scott's urging. "They say it would provide a precedent for the demand for all others," said Scott in an interview yesterday, "and besides, the matter is now before a grand jury."

The sharpest blow to Scott's asserting was a statement by Watergate assistant special prosecutor Richard J. Davis Thursday in U.S. District Court that "we have no basis for believing that Mr. Dean has committed perjury in any proceeding," undergirding Davis' remarks

is the fact that the Watergate prosecutor's office has in its possession the actual Sept. 15, 1972 and March 13, 1973 tapes—not just the summary and partial transcript available to Scott.

Scott hinted yesterday that the bulk of the claimed evidence may lie in the third tape, that of Feb. 28, and he said he wasn't sure the prosecutor's office had seen it. The Feb. 28 tape was not subpoenaed and it was not clear whether it had been turned over separately.

White House press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler said yesterday that "as far as I know we have provided to the special prosecutor's office the conversations Dean may have been involved in." He said he didn't think it was possible Scott had seen any material that had not been turned over to the office of Leon Jaworski.

Ironically, it was Scott's own demands for proof of the president's innocence that got him into his current situation. For months he has been urging the White House to make a clean breast of all information on the Watergate and related issues. It was a series of furious phone calls from Scott to White House aides demanding assurances of Mr. Nixon's innocence that finally

brought Alexander M. Haig Jr. running to Scott's Cleveland Park home last December with a packet of documents purporting to be accurate and undoctored summaries and partial transcripts of the three key tapes.

Scott says he read them and found them convincing, that he isn't sure the Watergate prosecutor has seen all the same material. But he conceded yesterday that the purported summaries and partial transcripts could have been inaccurate, presented in a misleading fashion, with key parts left out, to discredit Dean and help the President.

"What I know from the document could have been cooked up—but I don't think it is," he said. "The only thing that will prove it is if they make it public."

"I'm perfectly confident in my own mind that the tapes will affirm what I said."

Meanwhile Scott, a canny political veteran who has served both in the House and the Senate and was GOP national chairman as far back as 1948, is well aware that the White House's failure to come forward with anything corroborating his assertions has badly hurt him, at least for the moment. And he is aware that many think he has been duped or has misread or overstated the evidence.

He reads the warning signals—the mail from Republican supporters in Pennsylvania, urging him to get off the President's bandwagon, the gingerly way his Senate colleagues back away from discussing the issue, the continued pressure from reporters to produce some tangible evidence for his claims.

Although troubled by the situation, Scott says he is confident his Senate colleagues believe he is making his statements in good faith, on the basis of what he thinks the documents show. "My colleagues know whether I'm believable, and I rest my position on that."

And if he has been duped by the White House? "I will not react mildly," he promised. But meanwhile, he has been steadfastly backing up the White House despite suspicions of many of his colleagues that he has been left to twist slowly, slowly in the wind."