

Transcripts Raise More Questions

By John F. Lawrence
Los Angeles Times

Washington

President Nixon portrayed his tapes as discrediting testimony of his chief accuser, John W. Dean III, but the transcripts Mr. Nixon released yesterday appear to substantiate many key points of Dean's version.

Moreover, the tapes contain such a broad array of damaging material on the coverage and on presidential thinking about various aspects of the Watergate investigation as to make it apparent why Mr. Nixon has been so reluctant to give them up.



It's clear now that the President, faced with little chance of keeping the material secret forever, is hoping his own act of making it public, coupled with his appeal for a sympathetic reading and his stepping up momentum from the House impeachment schedule, will take the peachment inquiry.

What seems more likely is that the very ambiguities in the tapes which Mr. Nixon hopes will save him will instead intensify pressures for still more materials. Far from laying to rest suspicions about the President, the transcripts serve to heighten them further.

In a summary made public a few hours before the transcripts, the White House pointed to these conflicts with Dean's testimony before the Senate Watergate Committee:

● A tape of the Sept. 15, 1972, discussion between Dean and the President "does not in any way support Dean's testimony that the President was 'fully aware of the coverage.'"

● Tapes showed the former White House counsel told Mr. Nixon about hush-money demands from Watergate defendants on March 21, 1973, not on March 13, as Dean had testified.

● Instead of telling the President all about the coverage on March 21, 1973, Dean omitted references to a number of his own acts — suborning perjury and ban-

ding hush-money, among other things.

On two of the three points, the transcripts are at best ambiguous and at worst, contradictory of the White House summary.

The most ambiguous is the transcript of the September 15 meeting. The discussion of the Watergate affair in the wake of the first indictments announced that day was lengthy. At one point Mr. Nixon said to Dean, "But the way you have handled all this seems to me has been very skillful — putting your fingers in the leaks that have sprung here and sprung there."

The White House, in its summary, contended that Mr. Nixon was not referring to a coverage but rather to politics, civil suits and other matters.

The dialogue, however, left at least the suspicion of presidential knowledge — at another point Mr. Nixon talked of the possibility that the worst might happen, without elaborating, but that you button things up and hope for the best.

If that transcript is ambiguous, the one for March 21,

1973, shows precisely that Dean did tell the President about his role in hush-money activities and about suborning perjury.

As to the question of dates, the President is correct that he and Dean discussed hush-money on the 21st, not the 13th. But the transcripts also showed how easy it would have been to confuse the dates. On both occasions, the two discussed at length the Watergate affair and its potential problems for the administration.

There is another point on which Dean's testimony is, indeed, in error. He told the Senate he could not recall being asked to write a report during that period hanging out all the Watergate dirty linen. The tapes showed he was asked to write one, but the context was not wholly supportive of the President.

One strong impression left by the transcripts was that the President wanted a Dean report that continued to whitewash at least some of the White House involvement.

On many other points not specifically contested by the

White House, the transcripts supported Dean's testimony — about the extensive discussions of hush-money and the fact the President did not say it would be wrong, for instance.

It will take legal minds to determine whether the tapes show conclusively that the President committed any illegal acts. But where the transcripts aren't conclusive, there will be demands for more.

As the battle to get them shapes up on Capitol Hill and at the special prosecutor's office, Mr. Nixon will be off first to address a Republican group in Phoenix on Friday, then to open a commencement exercise in Oklahoma the following week.

In June there is the possibility of a summit meeting in Moscow.

It will be an effort to leave Watergate behind, to leave a trail of presidential activity that will modify the effects of those 1308 pages of transcript.

He has tried the approach before without lasting success.