

White House Strategy

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Ten minutes after John Dean left the Oval Office on April 16, 1973, to contemplate his resignation, President Nixon's top aides, H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman walked in for a chat.

Mr. Nixon told them he had just asked Dean to sign a letter of resignation, in case it should be needed. The President said he had also assured Dean that he was taking the same precautionary steps with Haldeman and Ehrlichman themselves.

"Wasn't that the proper thing to say to him?" Mr. Nixon wondered.

"That's fine," Ehrlichman said, adding a few moments later that he and Haldeman were looking around for some lawyers.

"Good, good," the President told them. "How has the scenario worked out? May I ask you?"

Haldeman thought it was going very well and then proceeded to outline it.

"You became aware some

time ago," the then-White House chief of staff told Mr. Nixon, "that this thing did not pare out the way it was supposed to and that there were some discrepancies between what you had been told by Dean in the report that there was nobody in the White House involved, which may still be true."

Ehrlichman added a thought that he said came from White House press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler.

"Remember you had John Dean go to Camp David to write it [the report] up. He came down and said, 'I can't,'" Ehrlichman told the President. "That is the tip-off and right then you started to move."

Haldeman: "The scenario is that he told you he couldn't write a report so obviously you had to take him off."

The President: "Right, right."

Ehrlichman: "And so then we started digging into it and we went to San Clemente. While I was out there, I talked to a lot of people on the telephone,

talked to several witnesses in person, kept feeding information to you and as soon as you saw the dimensions in this thing from the reports you were getting the staff — who were getting into it — Moore, me, Garment and others."

Haldeman: "You brought Len Garment in."

Ehrlichman: "You began to move . . . and then it culminated last week."

"Right," the President said once again.

The so-called "scenario" that the three men discussed that April Monday last year is the same one that the White House has adhered to ever since. But yesterday's massive release of the transcripts of Mr. Nixon's conversations about Watergate raises at least some fresh questions about its accuracy.

Several of them stem from the now-famous March 21, 1973, meeting in the White House at which Dean warned the President of "a cancer" growing on the presidency, told him of a "blackmail" attempt by Watergate

conspirator E. Howard Hunt, added that Haldeman, Ehrlichman, former Attorney General John N. Mitchell and Dean himself might all be charged with "obstruction of justice."

It was a session that contained some blunt assessments for several of the men, now long gone from the White House and the administration, who are now facing trial on just such charges in U.S. District Court Judge John J. Sirica's courtroom this September.

At one point, for example, the President said that Mitchell "is seriously involved and we are trying to keep him with us." At another point, Dean told the President he thought Haldeman's deputy, Gordon Strachan, another of those indicted, might even have known about the Watergate bugging of Democratic National Committee headquarters in advance.

Dean was explicit about the "blackmail" from Hunt. The word was used repeatedly in the conversation.

"His (Hunt's) price is

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pretty high," the President observed moments after Haldeman walked into the room, "but at least we can buy time on that as I pointed out to John (Dean)."

The talk turned to raising the \$12,000 that Hunt had demanded, to laundering it — perhaps, Dean suggested, by going "to Vegas with it or a bookmaker in New York City." Haldeman unhappily reported that the \$350,000 he had been keeping in a White House safe was all the money that they had on hand.

"That is the trouble," Haldeman exclaimed. "We are so (adjective deleted) square that we get caught at everything."

The President's men were not always kind in speaking of one another. Former White House special counsel Charles W. Colson was described as too close to Hunt. The President observed that Colson had even been going around and giving Hunt hope of executive clemency.

"That is your fatal flaw in Chuck," Haldeman said. "He is an operator in expedi-

ency, and he will pay at the time and where he is to accomplish whatever there is to do. And that, and that's — I would believe that he has made that commitment if Hunt says he has."

Mr. Nixon suggested that "somebody" had to "sit on Colson."

Haldeman agreed. Colson, he said, "talks too much."

A new grand jury investigation to head off the Senate Watergate committee's upcoming hearings was bandied about. A public report was discussed. The President said he wanted Ehrlichman, Haldeman, Mitchell and Dean to get together and talk about what to do next in the mushrooming scandal.

Mitchell was out of town. Mr. Nixon met with the other three later the same day in his suite at the Executive Office Building.

The transcript of that get-together suggested the kind of report the President was thinking of getting from Dean. It would be, Mr. Nixon said, "very general, understand . . . make it very gen-

eral, your investigation of the case."

Dean apparently had reservations. "It does not clean the problem out," he said.

Ehrlichman, however, seemed to like the idea. He said it would "permit the President to clean it (the problem) out at such time as it does come up . . . by saying 'I relied on it (the Dean report). And now this later thing turns up, and I don't condone that. And if I had known that before, obviously I would have run it down.'"

The session ended inconclusively, with Mr. Nixon rushing off, apparently for another appointment, and one last observation.

"What the hell does one disclose," the President asked his aides, "that isn't going to blow something?"

That very night, according to the Watergate grand jury, Fred LaRue arranged for the delivery of \$75,000 to Hunt's lawyer, William O. Bittman. The grand jury charged that the payment followed a phone call earlier in the day from Haldeman to Mitchell and then another

phone call from Mitchell to LaRue, a top deputy at the Committee for the Re-Election of the President.

A few weeks later, on April 19, 1973, Mr. Nixon was meeting at his EOB office with John J. Wilson and Frank H. Strickler, the newly hired attorneys for Haldeman and Ehrlichman.

Dean had told Mr. Nixon explicitly at their March 21 meeting that Hunt was threatening to expose some of the "seamy things" he had done for the White House.

By contrast, Wilson said both his clients had led him to believe that "Dean's presentation goes no further, as far as we know, than money to take care of their (Watergate defendants') families."

"That's right," Mr. Nixon assured him.

Wilson: "And legal counsel."

"That's right," the President said once again. "I am confident their motive in every instance was to help their families and with their legal counsel . . . I can't see that that's wrong."