

Nixon Depicted in Transcripts as Having Searched for Ways to Hide Details of Watergate

OPTIONS WEIGHED

Key Meeting Indicates President's Interest in Hunt Hush Money

NYTimes
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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, April 30—The transcripts of recordings of President Nixon's key Watergate conversations released today depict an embattled leader searching early last year for a way to keep details of the case from becoming public but indecisive on the best way to do it.

The transcripts, edited by the White House before release, show that Mr. Nixon ruled out clemency for E. Howard Hunt Jr., one of the Watergate conspirators. And they show a great deal of interest on the part of the President about the possibility of paying "hush" money to Mr. Hunt for his silence.

At a March 21, 1973, meeting, the President seemed to press at length for such payments. Some was paid that night, according to a subsequent Watergate cover-up in-

Transcripts

The New York Times begins today, on Page 27, the publication in chronological order of the tape transcripts concerning Watergate as edited and made public by the White House. The additional transcripts will appear on subsequent days.

dictment. But at a meeting on April 14, when silence money for Mr. Hunt was discussed again, the President said funds could be found but added, "But not to hush up. . . . That's the point."

In his March 21 talk with John W. Dean 3d, Mr. Nixon discussed over and over again option, and never said that silence money would be wrong. In fact, he said at one point that paying as much as \$1-million "would be worthwhile."

As for the role of Mr. Dean, the President's former counsel and now his chief accuser, the transcripts suggest that he was considerably less zealous about getting the truth out than he led the Senate Watergate committee to believe.

Released at Mid-Afternoon

The White House did not release the 1,308 pages of transcripts until mid-afternoon, making a careful reading today of all the conversations impossible. A closer reading in the next days and weeks should provide a clearer picture of the President's actions.

But the following points were immediately apparent:

¶There was no evidence that Mr. Nixon knew anything ahead of time about the planning and execution of the Watergate burglary on June 17, 1972.

¶Nothing in the transcripts showed that Mr. Nixon had a clear picture of the facts as early as Sept. 15, 1972—thus contradicting Mr. Dean's testimony—but the President appeared to have had some knowledge of the situation before the March 21 meeting.

¶There appeared to be no question in the minds of Mr. Nixon and his chief assistants, H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman, that as many facts as possible should be kept from

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the public and the prosecutors.

¶Mr. Nixon was apparently concerned about keeping facts under cover to protect himself politically, as well as to keep loyal assistants from being prosecuted.

¶The tapes strongly support one of the Watergate special prosecutor's theories — that a motive behind the alleged high-level cover-up was a desire to prevent disclosure of the 1971 burglary of the office of Dr. Daniel Ellsberg's former psychiatrist. Nonetheless, the President seemed agreeable to paying Mr. Hunt mostly to buy his silence on the Watergate case rather than on the Ellsberg case.

¶Mr. Nixon did rule out executive clemency for Mr. Hunt, but his primary reason seemed to be that the granting of clemency would be unwise politically rather than wrong morally or legally.

¶Even before the 1972 election, Mr. Nixon promised Mr. Dean that after he was re-elected he would take strides to use the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other Federal agencies against his political enemies.

Transcripts Missing

The White House said that 11 of the 42 conversations subpoenaed by the House Judiciary Committee were never recorded or did not take place and that, therefore, there were no transcripts.

According to J. Fred Buzhardt, the White House counsel, four conversations on April 15, 1973, were not recorded because the machine ran out of tape before the discussions took place. Five other conversations, he said, took place on telephones that were not connected to a recording device, and tapes of two others were never found, apparently meaning that the conversations never occurred.

In many of the transcripts, the actual words from the tape were replaced by the notations "[unintelligible]" or "[explosive]"

It was difficult to know what information was lost, but many of the "unintelligible" sections seemed to bear on significant matters or to be in areas where the President's voice would logically have been raised.

"We had better get the other things out of the way," the President said on April 14, 1973. Then the transcript continued: "I think we're going to be—I don't want to be hammered— [unintelligible] I don't want to—I don't [unintelligible] they'll hammer the hell out of us anyway, but I don't [unintelligible] that's a—that's just a [unintelligible] all here. We'll take—we'll take a hell of a beating [unintelligible] in the next 30 days, a lot of heat, we'll take with regard to why we aren't appearing why we aren't going to appear before the committee . . ."

Funds for Defendants

By March 21, 1973, the seven men initially convicted for breaking into the Democratic headquarters in the Watergate building had been paid hundreds of thousands of dollars in money that had been raised for Mr. Nixon's election campaign.

Early in the March 21 meeting Mr. Nixon Mr. Hunt's "black-mail" demand for \$120,000 more. If Mr. Hunt were not paid the money, Mr. Dean said, he would tell of the "seamy" things he had done for the White House.

Mr. Nixon accepted this disclosure with apparent equanimity and elicited from Mr. Dean the guess that it might cost as much as \$1-million to buy off Mr. Hunt forever.

The President remarked, "We could get that. On the money, if you need the money you could get that. You could get a million dollars. You could get it in cash. I know where it could be gotten. It is not easy. But it could be done. But the question is, who in the hell would handle it? Any ideas on that?"

A few minutes later, the President and Mr. Dean had the following exchanges:

Mr. Nixon: Just look at the immediate problem, don't you think you have to handle Hunt's financial situation damn soon?

Mr. Dean: I think, that is—I talked with [former Attorney General John N.] Mitchell about that last night and—

Mr. Nixon: It seems to me we have to keep the cap on the bottle that much, or we don't have any options.

Mr. Dean: That's right.

Mr. Nixon: Either that or it all blows right now?

Mr. Dean: That's the question.

Earlier Disclaimers

Earlier this year, Mr. Nixon said he had asserted that "it would be wrong" to pay silence money. In a later speech, the President corrected himself and said that he was talking directly about the granting of clemency when he said "it would be wrong" and indirectly about paying blackmail money.

Following is the critical conversation:

Mr. Nixon: Let me put it this way: Let us suppose that you get the million bucks, and you get the proper way to handle it. You could hold that side?

Mr. Dean: Uh, huh.

Mr. Nixon: It would seem to me that would be worthwhile.

Mr. Dean: Well, that's one problem.

Mr. Nixon: I know you have a problem here. You have the problem with Hunt and his clemency.

Mr. Dean: That's right. And you are going to have a clemency problem with the others. They all are going to expect to be out, and that may put you in a position that is just untenable at some point. You know, the Watergate hearings just over, Hunt now demanding clemency or he is going to blow. And, politically, it's impossible for you to do it. You know, after everybody. . . .

Mr. Nixon: That's right! [the transcriber's exclamation pt.]

Mr. Dean: I am not sure that you will ever be able to deliver on the clemency. It may be just too hot.

Mr. Nixon: You can't do it politically until after the '74 elections, that's for sure. Your point is that even then you couldn't do it.

Mr. Dean: That's right. It may further involve you in a way you should not be involved in this.

Mr. Nixon: No—it is wrong, that's for sure.

As late as April 14, in a conversation with Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Ehrlichman, the President was still discussing the pros and cons of paying money to Mr. Hunt and the other Watergate break-in figures.

Earlier Conversation

Recalling an earlier conversation with Mr. Dean during which Mr. Dean had said it might require a million dollars to meet the demands of Mr. Hunt and others, the President recalled that he said to Mr. Dean, "I appreciate what you're doing."

Then the President went on to say, "I knew it was for the purpose of helping the poor bastards through the trial, but you can't offer that John. You can't—or could you? I guess you could. Attorney fees? Could you go a support program for these people for four years?"

When Mr. Ehrlichman responded he had no idea, the President said "Well, they have supported other people in jail for years."

The President then said funds would be found. But he added, "But not to hush up . . . that's the point."

In his television defense of his position last night, Mr. Nixon quoted himself as having said that clemency was "wrong," but he did not give the entire context of the discussion.

About halfway through the Nixon-Dean meeting, Mr. Haldeman entered the room. In his broadcast last night, Mr. Nixon quoted a discussion between himself and Mr. Haldeman out of context.

Mr. Nixon noted that he had told Mr. Haldeman that, if the money were paid, "we are going to be bled to death. And, in the end, it is all going to come out anyway. Then you get the worst of both worlds. We are going to lose, and people are going to . . ."

Then Mr. Haldeman interrupted and said, "And look like dopes."

The President quoted himself last night as replying, "And in effect look like a cover-up. So that we can't do."

Discussion Continued

The President ended his description of the discussion with that passage, but in the next sentence, he continued:

"Now, the other line, however, if you take that line, that means then we have to look square in the eye as to what the hell those losses are, and see which people can — so we can avoid criminal liability? Right?"

The transcripts show that Mr. Nixon did not order that the money be paid, but the indictment of Mr. Haldeman and six other top White House or campaign officials alleges that within hours of the March 21 meeting arrangements were made to pay Mr. Hunt \$75,000.

Mr. Nixon said last night that he had decided during the meeting to "convene a new grand jury and to send everyone before the grand jury with instructions to testify."

There is no indication that such a grand jury was ever empaneled—and the transcripts indicate that Mr. Nixon considered this alternative only as a means to keep his assistants from having to testify in public before the Senate Watergate committee.

There was the following exchange:

Mr. Nixon: John Ehrlichman, of course, has raised the point of another grand jury. I just don't know how you could do it. On what basis. I could call for it, but I . . .

Mr. Dean: That would be out of the question.

Mr. Nixon: I hate to leave with differences in view of all this stripped land. I could understand this, but I think I want another grand jury proceeding, and we have the White House before them. Is that right, John?

Mr. Dean: Uh huh.

Mr. Nixon: That is the point, see. Of course! That

would make the difference. I want everybody in the White House called. And that gives you a reason not to have to go before the Ervin and Baker committee. It puts it in an executive session, in a sense.

The President was referring, as he made clear in a later exchange, to the fact that grand jury proceedings are normally kept secret.

Role of Mitchell

It was during the March 21 meeting that Mr. Nixon was told that Mr. Mitchell, the former Attorney General and campaign director, had given the final go-ahead for the Watergate burglary.

The next day, the President met with Mr. Mitchell for nearly two hours and never asked him whether he had, in fact, authorized the burglary.

Mr. Mitchell told the Senate Watergate committee last year that if Mr. Nixon had ever asked him he would have told the President the whole truth.

Although the transcripts do not show, as Mr. Dean had testified, any indication at the Sept. 15, 1972, Nixon-Dean meeting, that Mr. Nixon was aware of an extensive Watergate cover-up, there was a discussion at that meeting about what to do about the President's political enemies.

Mr. Nixon gave Mr. Dean the following orders:

"I want the most comprehensive notes on all those who tried to do us in. They didn't have to do it. If we had had a very close election and they

were playing the other side I would understand this. No, they were doing this quite deliberately, and they are asking for it and they are going to get it.

"We have not used the power in the first four years, as you know. We have never used it. We have not used the bureau [F.B.I.], and we have not used the Justice Department, but things are going to change now. And they are either going to do it right or go."

Mr. Dean responded, "What an exciting prospect."

The March 21 meeting was not the first time Mr. Nixon and Mr. Dean had discussed the matter of clemency. On Feb. 28, Mr. Nixon voiced sympathy "for those poor guys in jail, particularly for Hunt with his wife dead," and the following exchange ensued:

Mr. Nixon: Do you expect clemency in a reasonable time? What would you advise on that?

Mr. Dean: I think it is one of those things we will have to watch very closely.

Mr. Nixon: You couldn't do it, say, in six months.

Mr. Dean: No, you couldn't.

And similar conversations continued until mid-April.

At a meeting with Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Ehrlichman on April 14, Mr. Nixon was told by Mr. Ehrlichman that G. Gordon Liddy, who allegedly organized the Watergate burglary, had been promised a pardon by Mr. Mitchell.

Mr. Nixon accepted this information without additional comment.