

When Nixon Knew Of Aides' Roles

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The edited transcripts of President Nixon's recorded White House conversations indicate that Mr. Nixon was aware of the possible involvement of his top aides well before March 21, 1973, the date he has maintained he first learned of the Watergate coverup.

The tapes show that on Sept. 15, 1972, and Feb. 28, March 13 and March 20, 1973, Mr. Nixon, a lawyer, made statements, asked questions and received information that indicated he knew there was far more to the Watergate story than government investigators said they had been told by that time.

For example, on March 13, 1973, according to the transcripts, White House Counsel John W. Dean III specifically told Mr. Nixon that White House aide Gordon Strachan was aware of the illegal Watergate bugging operation during the period in 1972 when telephones at Democratic National Headquarters were tapped.

"I will be damned," the President responded. Then, referring to his White House chief of staff, H.R. Haldeman, Mr. Nixon added: "Well that is the problem in Bob's case." Strachan worked directly for Haldeman in the White House.

Advised by Dean that investigators "would

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have one hell of a time proving that Strachan had knowledge of it though," the President asked Dean: "Who knew better? Magruder?"

"Magruder and Liddy," Dean replied, referring to Mr. Nixon's deputy campaign manager, Jeb Stuart Magruder, and Watergate burglar G. Gordon Liddy.

"Oh, I see," the President observed at that point in the conversation. "The other weak link for Bob (Haldeman) is Magruder. He hired him, et cetera."

At no time in the conversations before March 21 — and rarely in those after that critical date — did the President or his advisers even discuss telling the whole truth to either the public or law enforcement authorities.

Instead, the edited transcripts of the tapes reveal discussions of alternatives ranging from public-relations offensives to total silence, or to the possibility of extending executive clemency to the Watergate burglars.

On February 28, the transcripts indicate that Mr. Nixon himself raised the question of offering executive clemency to some of the Watergate burglars.

Told by Dean that "Well, there is every indication that they (the burglars) are hanging in tough right now" — an apparent reference to their silence about the Watergate raid — Mr. Nixon responded:

"What the hell do they expect though? Do they expect clemency in a reasonable time? What would you advise on that?"

Dean: "I think it is one of those things we will have to watch very closely . . . for example —"

The President: "You couldn't do it, say, in six months."

Dean: "No, you couldn't"

During the same meeting, which occurred several weeks before the sentencing of the seven original Watergate defendants, the President asked Dean if U.S. District Judge John Sirica "is trying to work on them to see who will break them down."

"Well, there is some of that," Dean replied in an apparent reference to publicly unrevealed facts known to the burglars.

On March 13 the President

asked Dean: "Is it too late to go the hang-out road?" — apparently meaning to take a candid approach — he was told by his counsel:

" . . . there is a certain domino situation here. If some things start going, a lot of other things are going to start going, and there can be a lot of problems if everybody starts falling. So there are dangers, Mr. President. I would be less than candid if I didn't tell you there are. There is a reason for not everyone going up and testifying" (before the Senate Watergate Committee).

Dean also told Mr. Nixon on March 13 that "I think there are some people (in the White House) who saw the fruits of" the Watergate wiretap — though Dean added that they did not know of "the criminal conspiracy to go in there." (the Democrats' Watergate headquarters)

Mr. Nixon did not ask Dean for details, the transcripts indicate.

Earlier, on February 28, Dean and the President engaged in the following colloquy during their discussion of the upcoming Senate hearings:

Dean: Well I was — We have come a long road on this thing now. I had thought it was an impossible task to hold together until after the election until things started falling out, but we have made it this far and I am convinced we are going to make it the whole road and put this thing in the funny pages of the history books rather than anything serious because actually —

The President: It will be somewhat serious but the main thing, of course, is also the isolation of the President.

Dean: Absolutely! Totally true!

The President: Because that, fortunately, is totally rue.

Dean: I know that, sir!

The President: (expletive deleted) of course, I am not dumb and I will never forget when I heard about this (adjective deleted) forced entry and bugging. I thought, what in the hell is this? What is the matter with these people? Are they crazy? I thought they were nuts! A prank! But it wasn't! It wasn't very funny. I think that our Democratic friends know that, too. They know what the hell it was. They don't think we'd be involved in such.

Dean: I think they do too.

The President: Maybe they don't. They don't think I would be involved in such stuff. They think I have people capable of it. And they are correct, in that Colson (special presidential counsel Charles W. Colson) would do anything . . . Colson's got (characterization deleted), but I really, really, — this stuff here — let's forget this. But let's remember this was not done by the White House. This was done by the Committee to Re-Elect, and (former Attorney General John N.) Mitchell was the chairman, correct?

Dean: That's correct.

The President then observed that if the Senate hearings "get out of hand," the result "is going to potentially ruin John Mitchell."

At the time of the discussion, investigator's still had failed to establish the existence of a coverup in Watergate or the involvement of high-level officials at either the White House or the Committee for the Re-Election of the President.

The first instance in the recorded conversations in which the President indicates that his knowledge exceeds that of the investigators occurs on Sept. 15, 1972 — the date of the original Watergate indictments.

Dean: Three months ago I would have had trouble predicting there would be a day when this would be forgotten, but I think I can say that 54 days from now nothing is going to come crashing down to our surprise . . .

The President: Oh well, this is a can of worms as you know a lot of this stuff that went on. And the people who worked this way are awfully embarrassed. But the way you have handled all this seems to me has been very skillful in putting your fingers in the leaks that have sprung here and sprung there. The grand jury is dismissed now?

Dean: That is correct.

Later in the conversation, Dean briefed the President on preparations for side-tracking Watergate hearings then being planned by the House Banking and Currency Committee.

"You really can't sit and worry about it all the time," the President advised Dean. "The worst may happen but it may not. So you just to button it up as well as you can and hope for the best, and remember basically the damn business is unfortunately trying to cut our losses."