

The Dialogue

Washington

In the confused and critical days after John W. Dean III went to the prosecutors with his coverup story, President Nixon and his loyal aides set out to pin the Watergate rap on former Attorney General and Nixon law partner John N. Mitchell, transcripts of the White House tapes indicate.

One conversation after another in mid-April 1973 appear to have returned to the Mitchell dilemma and how he would be smoked out. The apparent idea was that if Mitchell could be blamed as the major figure in the case, the scandal's spread might be checked.

According to the edited transcripts:

If Mitchell and the No. 2 man at the Committee for the Re-election of the President were indicted, Mr. Nixon said, that would be "the big fish."

As early as March 28, five days after Watergate burglar James McCord blew the lid off the scandal with his letter to Judge John J. Sirica, White House discussions about Mitchell's possible involvement were underway.

On that date, Attorney General Richard G. Kleindienst told presidential counselor John D. Ehrlichman that he, like Mr. Nixon, was concerned about Mitchell.

Within ten days, White House counsel John W. Dean III had decided to go to the prosecutors, and his story would "pull the plug" on Jeb Stuart Magruder, who had been Mitchell's deputy at the Committee for the Re-election of the President.

If Dean did that, Mr. Nixon told Ehrlichman, then Mitchell "has got to be concerned . . . that Magruder pulled the plug on him."

Nixon: Mitchell has got to decide whether he's going to tell John Dean, "look, here, I don't think you ought to say a word or you've got to go down and lie." Well, John

is not going to lie.

Ehrlichman: He says John Mitchell is sort of living in a dream world right now. He thinks this is all going to go away.

Nixon: He thinks that?

Ehrlichman: Yeah.

Nixon: John Dean thinks that John Mitchell is living in a dream world?

Ehrlichman: Yeah. He thinks that that's Mitchell's frame of mind on all of this.

In a lengthy meeting April 14, Mr. Nixon, chief of staff H. R. Haldeman and Ehrlichman discussed the need for some presidential envoy to go to Mitchell and try to persuade him to talk to the grand jury.

Ehrlichman proposed Secretary of State William P. Rogers and said his mission would be to tell Mitchell that "the jig is up. And the President strongly feels that the only way that this thing can end up being even a little net plus for the administration and for the presidency and preserve some thread is for you to go in and voluntarily make a statement."

The statement, he added, should say that Mitchell is "both morally and legally responsible." Mr. Nixon

agreed.

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Ehrlichman later suggested that Mitchell be called in to see Mr. Nixon, saying, he was "essentially convinced that Mitchell will understand this thing . . . and that if he goes in it redounds to the administration's advantage . . ."

Nixon: How does it redound to our advantage?

Ehrlichman: That you have a report from me based on three weeks' work; that when you got it, you im-

mediately acted to call Mitchell in as the provable wrongdoer, and you say, "My God, I've got a report here. And it's clear from this report that you are guilty as hell. Now, John, for (expletive deleted) sake go on in there and do what

you should. And let's get this thing cleared up and get it off the country's back and move on."

Mr. Nixon observed that Mitchell had denied the accusations but Ehrlichman responded by saying he had

sat in Haldeman's office, listening to a tape of Magruder saying "flat out" that he was guilty and that Mitchell was "going to force our fall."

Nixon: Did he say that? Did he say that?

Ehrlichman: Yeah.

Nixon: Well, we can't—

Ehrlichman: And I said to myself, "My God, you know, I'm a United States citizen. I'm standing here listening to this, what is my duty?"

Nixon: Well, the point is you've now told me. That's the problem.

Ehrlichman: That's correct. That's correct.

Nixon: See, the difference is that the problem of my position up to this time has been quite frankly, nobody ever told me a damn bit of this, that Mitchell was guilty.

Ehrlichman: That's right.

Haldeman: Well, we still don't know. I will still argue that I think the scenario that was spun out, that Dean spun out on Mitchell is basically the right one. I don't think Mitchell did order the Watergate bugging and I don't think he was specifically aware of the Watergate bugging at the time it was instituted. I honestly don't.

Nixon, a minute later, said: I'm not convinced he's guilty but I am convinced that he ought to go before a grand jury.

The plan was set for Ehrlichman to talk to both Magruder and Mitchell. Mr. Nixon, not sure how Mitchell would react, suggested that he might "take the offensive" and try to implicate White House figures such as Haldeman and former special counsel Charles W. Colson.

But they agreed that the

urgency of Mr. Nixon's request for Mitchell to cooperate should be emphasized.

"Mitchell's case is a killer," the President admitted. "You know it's a pain for me to do it — the Mitchell thing is damn painful."

Later that day, Ehrlichman talked first with Magruder and then with Mitchell, explaining to the former attorney general that Mr. Nixon felt the presidency was not helped by people "standing mute."

Mitchell, Ehrlichman reported to Mr. Nixon, replied that he "appreciated that," but that he had not kept silent to help or hurt the presidency.

"You know, these characters pulled this thing (the burglary) off without my knowledge," Ehrlichman quoted Mitchell as saying. "I never saw Liddy for months at a time. I didn't know what they were up to and nobody was more surprised than I was."

The next day the President called Haldeman.

Nixon: Look, if they get a hell of a big fish, that is going to take a lot of the fire out of this thing on the coverup and all that sort. If they get the President's former law partner and attorney general, you know. Do you agree or not? Am I—?

Haldeman: Yeah. What I feel is people want something to be done to explain it.

Nixon: Explain that they did it, and then of course the coverup comes in, and they did that too.

Haldeman: And it all makes sense. It is logical, believable, because it's true.

Nixon: Right.

Haldeman: And there it is — I can't — it seems to me that there is at least a strong possibility, if not probability or certainty, that

About Mitchell

public reaction is going to be. Well, thank God that is settled. Now let's get away from it . . .

Nixon: That's right . . .