

Nixon 'Scenario' on Tape

By R. W. Apple Jr.
New York Times

Washington

It was April 16, 1973. The day before, President Nixon had been told by senior Justice Department officials that a number of White House officials were involved in the Watergate cover-up.

That morning, Mr. Nixon held three meetings in his oval office: First he talked with H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman; then with John W. Dean III; then, again with Haldeman and Ehrlichman.

Their conversations were among the most riveting that appear in the mass of transcripts released Tuesday by the White House —

because they show Mr. Nixon carefully fitting together the pieces of what he calls a "scenario" to insulate himself from scandal.

"Look at the tapes for April 16," a senior White House official said earlier this week. "They're a riot. It sounds like the President is talking to the machine."

What he meant, he explained, was that Mr. Nixon — who knew that his conversation with Dean was being taken down by a hidden recording device — was leading his counsel along, step by step, building a record of his own innocence.

Haldeman, Ehrlichman and Mr. Nixon discussed in their first meeting, which

lasted only nine minutes, the necessity of persuading Dean to sign letters requesting a leave of absence and submitting his resignation because he was certain to be implicated in the Watergate coverup.

They may have discussed other matters, but it is impossible to tell because the transcript at that point is littered with "unintelligible" notations. In one one-minute portion, the notation appears 12 times.

Minutes later, in the same office, there are few interruptions in the transcript of the Dean talk.

As shown in the transcript, Mr. Nixon persuaded Dean to draft the two letters, then began to retrace with the young counsel what Dean had told him in their long conversation of March 21, when the two men repeatedly discussed "hush" money for the original Watergate defendants.

"You remember when you came in," Mr. Nixon said, "I asked you the specific question, is anybody on the White House staff involved in it? You told me, 'No.'"

"That's right," Dean replied.

After a number of further exchanges, with Mr. Nixon repeatedly suggesting that he really did not know much after the meeting, the President suggested that he knew that hush money had been paid. The transcript reads as follows:

"You had knowledge, Haldeman had knowledge, Ehrlichman had knowledge, and I suppose I did that night."

Then, in the manner of a defense attorney coaching his witness, Mr. Nixon began interrogating Dean. The transcript continues:

P. John, let me ask you this: Let us suppose this thing breaks and they ask you, John Dean, "Now, John Dean, you were the President's counsel. Did you report things to the President?"

D. I would refuse to answer any questions unless you waive the (executive) privilege.

P. On this point, I would not waive. I think you should say, "I reported to the President, he called me in and asked me before, when the event first occurred, and passed to the President the message that no White House personnel in the course of your investigation were involved."

At another point, Mr. Nixon admonished his counsel:

"On this privilege thing — nothing is privileged that involves wrongdoing . . . on your part or wrongdoing on the part of anybody else. I am telling you that now and I want you when you testify, if you do, to say that the President told you that. Would you do that? Would you agree to that?"

"Yes, sir," Dean replied.