

# 'This Is a War,' Nixon Told

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"This is a war," President Nixon told John W. Dean III and H. R. Haldeman on Sept. 15, 1972, in the taped conversation that appears first among those made public by the President this week.

"We take a few shots and it will be over. We will give them a few shots and it will be over. Don't worry. I wouldn't want to be on the other side right now. Would you?" the President asked.

If this confident assertion rings hollow today, there are few who would have questioned it at the time. Sept. 15, 1972, was the day Gordon Liddy, E. Howard Hunt Jr., James W. McCord and four other men were indicted in the Watergate conspiracy.

With the indictments, culpability for Watergate seemed to end at a fairly low level in the Nixon camp. Liddy, Hunt and McCord were names no one had heard of. As the November presidential election approached, Mr. Nixon and his closest associates seemed to have every reason for confidence, despite the protestations of Democratic candidate George McGovern that the

Nixon administration was "the most corrupt in the history of the nation."

It was in such an atmosphere that the first two White House conversations among those made public, those that appear in *The Washington Post* today, occurred. They are conversations of Sept. 15, 1972, and Feb. 28, 1973. The first was among the President, his chief of staff, Haldeman, and his counsel, Dean. The second was between Mr. Nixon and Dean alone. Later conversations will be carried in *The Post* on Friday and on subsequent days.

While Mr. Nixon and his aides were confident that Watergate could be handled in the fall and winter of 1972, they were not unaware that they had great problems, as the edited transcripts show.

There were repeated forays into Watergate from many quarters: the press, Capitol Hill, the courts. All were the subject of hour-upon-hour of White House strategy sessions, with the President presiding.

Before the election there was the threat of possible hearings by the House Banking and Currency Commit-

tee, led by Rep. Wright Patman (D-Tex.), and the problems created by a civil suit filed by attorney Edward Bennett Williams for the Democratic Party. There was an audit of Nixon re-election committee finances by the Federal Elections Office that had recommended a criminal investigation by the Justice Department.

"The Bureau ought to go into Edward Bennett Williams and start questioning him and have him tied up for a couple of days," Haldeman said in the Sept. 15 conversation.

"Yeah, I hope they do," Mr. Nixon responded.

As for the audit of re-election committee finances, Dean told the President on Sept. 15 that the "report referred over to Justice is on a shelf right now because they have hundreds of violations—they have violations of McGovern, of Humphrey, violations of Jackson, and several hundred Congressional violations. They don't want to start prosecuting one any more than they prosecute the other."

"They definitely will not prosecute us unless they prosecute the others," Mr. Nixon replied.

## Haldeman, Dean in Sept. '72

After the President's landslide victory and until the time of his Feb. 28, 1973, conversation with Dean, there were other threats to Watergate secrecy: the first Watergate trial, a quiet investigation by Sen. Edward M. Kennedy that eventually led to formation of the Senate Watergate Committee, and the nomination hearings just opening for L. Patrick Gray III as permanent FBI director.

The Feb. 28 conversation shows Mr. Nixon and Dean developing and refining legal strategy — the concept of executive privilege as a means of keeping White House aides from testifying before investigative bodies—and political strategy, with a number of references to a meeting between the President and Sen. Howard H. Baker of Tennessee, the senior Republican on the Ervin Committee.

These were the broad issues discussed by Mr. Nixon and Dean, but the conversations have a fascination that extends far beyond strategy and even the question of whether the President had any so-called "guilty" knowledge.

For the tapes show, as has rarely been shown to any people before, some

of the most private thoughts, actions and manners of a nation's leader.

"Just remember," the President said Sept. 15, 1972, barely moments into the first conversation, "all the trouble we're taking, we'll have to chance to get back one day."

Mr. Nixon is shown to be not without humor: "OK, John," he said to former Attorney General John N. Mitchell in a phone conversation Sept. 15, "goodnight." Get a good night's sleep. And don't bug anybody without asking me? OK?"

Mr. Nixon's view of the media as an enemy is apparent. "Well, one hell of a lot of people don't give one damn about this issue of suppression of the press, etc.," Mr. Nixon told Dean on Feb. 28, 1973. "What (expletive omitted) to they want them to do—go through the 1968 syndrome when they were 8 to 1 against us? They are only 3 to 1 this time. It is really sickening though to see these guys."

By the end of February, 1973, Dean had begun meeting regularly with Mr. Nixon, no longer dealing only through Haldeman and presidential assistant John D. Ehrlichman.

The Feb. 28 conversation seems to reflect a growing ease that Dean felt in Nixon's presence. When Mr. Nixon spoke distainfully of members of Congress, saying "they become irrelevant because they are so damned irresponsible," Dean was ready with a similar observation of his own.

"Yes, sir," the President's 34-year-old counsel responded. "I spent some years on the Hill myself and one of the things I always noticed was the inability of the Congress to deal effectively with the Executive Branch because they have never provided themselves with adequate staffs, had adequate information available."

At the conclusion of that conversation, almost a month before the Watergate conspiracy began to collapse, Mr. Nixon expressed indignation at the possible sentencing of the original seven Watergate defendants.

"You know when they talk about a 35-year sentence, here is something to think about," he told Dean. "There were no weapons! Right? There were no injuries! Right? There was no success! Why does that sort of thing happen? It is just ridiculous."