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Nixon Defense 'Scenario'
Devised in One Morning

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WASHINGTON, May 1—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 Water-gate cover-up.

That morning, Mr. Nixon held three meetings in his Oval Office. First he talked with H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman; then with John W. Dean 3d; then, again, with Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Ehrlichman.

Their conversations were among the most riveting that appear in the mass of transcripts released yesterday 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.

'They're a Riot'

"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 Mr. 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.

Mr. Haldeman, Mr. Ehrlichman and Mr. Nixon discussed in their first meeting, which lasted only nine minutes, the necessity of persuading Mr. Dean to sign letters requesting a leave of absence and submitting his resignation because he was certain to be implicated in the Watergate cover-up.

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 Mr. Dean to draft the two letters, then began to retrace with the

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young counsel what Mr. Dean had told him in their long conversation of March 21, when the two men repeatedly discussed "hush" money for the original Watergate defendants.

'The Specific Question'

"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," Mr. 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 Mr. 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...in 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," Mr. Dean replied. Apparently eager to find some way to indicate publicly

for ending the cover-up, the President quizzed Mr. Dean about Jeb Stuart Magruder, the first Nixon aide to agree to help the Watergate prosecution.

"What got Magruder to talk?" Mr. Nixon asked. "I would like to take the credit."

Then, in sharp contrast to the pragmatic tone of the March 21 meeting and the equally pragmatic tone of the other April 16 meetings, Mr. Nixon began to lecture Mr. Dean.

"Tell the truth," he said. "That is the thing I have told everybody around here. Tell the truth!" And: "Also there is a question of right and wrong, too."

When Mr. Dean left the President, Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Ehrlichman returned, and the three men began to discuss the "scenario" and Mr. Dean, whom the President described as "quite the operator." Mr. Nixon expressed his pleasure at the way Mr. Dean had responded and said he felt "a little bit better about" the entire situation.

Mr. Haldeman then reported that the scenario "works out very good," and immediately began to describe it to Mr. Nixon, again in the manner of

a lawyer coaching a client: "You became aware some time ago that this thing did not parse out the way it was supposed to and that there were some discrepancies between what you had been told by Dean in the report . . ."

Mr. Nixon kept asking questions about why he did something, as if he were seeking plausible motivations to make the scenario hold together.

The following passage is an example:

P. How do I get credit for getting Magruder to the stand?

E. Well, it is very simple. You took Dean off the case right then.

H. Two weeks ago, the end of March.

P. That's right.

E. The end of March. Remember that letter you signed to me?

P. Uh, huh.

E. 30th of March.

P. I signed it. Yes.

E. Yes, sir, and it says Dean is off it. I want you to get into it. Find out what the facts are. Be prepared to . . .

P. Why did I taken Dean off? Because he was involved? I did it, really, because he was involved with [L. Patrick] Gray [then director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation].

E. Well, there was a lot of stuff breaking in the papers. but at the same time . . .

H. The scenario is that he told you he couldn't write a report so obviously you had to take him off.

P. Right, right.

The transcript of the April 16 tapes, on which the foregoing dispatch is based, will appear in The New York Times tomorrow.