

Cover-Up...

A reading of the first installment of the transcripts of the White House tapes as published in The Times supports the contention that President Nixon was aware of a deliberate cover-up of the Watergate scandal. The transcripts also offer a striking insight into the ethical decay that pervaded the Oval Office. The deleted expletives could not have been nearly as appalling as the moral standards which Mr. Nixon and his aides applied to serious problems of politics, law and justice.

Though incomplete and flawed by the long time gaps between some of the recordings, these documents indicate that the President understood the efforts to prevent the facts from becoming known long before the meeting of March 21, 1973, when John Dean confronted him with the sordid details. Six months earlier, on Sept. 15, 1972, Mr. Nixon told Mr. Dean: "But the way you have handled all this seems to me has been very skillful putting your fingers in the leaks that have sprung here and sprung there."

A White House "explanation" that these remarks were made in the context of a political campaign rather than of "a criminal plot to obstruct justice" is hardly relevant. The President knew that a criminal offense had been committed. Motives for the cover-up shift—from winning the election to saving the Nixon Presidency; but the transcripts suggest that the cover-up first drew Mr. Nixon's praise as early as that pre-election month of September.

On March 13, 1973, Mr. Nixon found nothing wrong with Mr. Dean's warning that Hugh Sloan represented a high risk because "he has a compulsion to cleanse his soul by confession" and was therefore being given "a lot of stroking."

Although the notorious March 21 meeting did place Mr. Nixon in the role of the executive intent on having his advisers lay out all the options, that meeting also saw several crucial pieces in the search for truth fall into place. The President learned that perjury had been committed by three persons involved in the case—and took no action. Indeed, his reaction to the perjury charge against Egil Krogh was a consoling: "Perjury is an awful hard rap to prove."

Despite all the pragmatic arguments over the advantages and dangers of paying hush-money to E. Howard Hunt, the transcript shows that Mr. Nixon failed to put a stop to such proposals with his often repeated statement, "But it would be wrong, that's for sure." On the contrary, the President appears to have concluded that "his [Hunt's] price is pretty high, but at least we can buy the time on that. . . ." Shortly thereafter Mr. Nixon added: "Here we have the Hunt problem that ought to be handled now."

Nothing that was subsequently said could be understood to have countermanded that implied order. The \$75,000 payment was made later on the same day.

Whether or not Mr. Nixon can make a convincing case that he was misunderstood by those who paid off Mr. Hunt, the fact remains that the President of the United States took no official action against a blackmail threat. Such moral degradation of the Presidency is of a piece with Mr. Nixon's readiness, now clearly documented, to use national security as the ultimate cover-up. (Dean: "I think we could get by on that.")

The shame that emanates from these recorded words ranges from Mr. Nixon's threat to use his power and that of the Department of Justice against "all those who tried to do us in" to the more general assault on integrity in government. The nature of that threat makes it doubly important that the inquiry into the case of Mr. Nixon be carried forward with all the available evidence.