

A Concise Version of the Key Tape

Following are extracts from the most quoted and discussed single conversation among the edited transcripts released by the White House Tuesday—the March 21, 1973 meeting among President Nixon, John Dean and H. R. Haldeman.

The extracts amount to perhaps 20% of the total conversation, and extensive editing was required to reduce the White House transcript to this length. The deletions were chosen with the intention of preserving the essence of the conversation, at the expense of producing an impression of coherence not present in the original.—Ed.

D. The reason that I thought we ought to talk this morning is because in our conversations, I have the impression that you don't know everything I know and it makes it very difficult for you to make judgments that only you can make on some of these things . . . I think that there is no doubt about the seriousness of the problem we've got. We have a cancer within, close to the presidency, that is growing. It is growing daily. It's compounded, growing geometrically now, because it compounds itself. That will be clear if I, you know, explain some of the details of why it is. Basically, it is because (1) we are being blackmailed; (2) people are going to start perjuring themselves very quickly that have not had to perjure themselves to protect other people in the line. And there is no assurance—P. That that won't bust? D. That that won't bust. . . .

D. Alright. Now post-June 17th: Liddy said if they all got counsel instantly and said we will ride this thing out. Alright, then they started making demands. "We have to have attorneys' fees. We don't have any money ourselves, and you are asking us to take this through the election." Alright, so arrangements were made through Mitchell, initiating it. And I was present in discussions where these guys had to be taken care of. Their attorneys' fees had to be done. Kalmbach raised some cash.

D. That's the most troublesome post-thing because (1) Bob is involved in that; (2) John is involved in that; (3) I am involved in that; (4) Mitchell is involved in that. And that is an obstruction of justice. . . .

D. Here is what is happening right now. What sort of brings matters to the (unintelligible). One, this is going to be a continual blackmail operation by Hunt and Liddy and the Cubans. No doubt about it . . . Hunt now is demanding another \$72,000 for his own personal expenses; another \$50,000 to pay attorneys' fees; \$120,000. Some (1) he wanted it as of the close of business yesterday. He said, "I am going to be sentenced on Friday, and I've got to get my financial affairs in order." . . . Hunt has now made a direct threat against Ehrlichman. As a result of this, this is his blackmail. He says, "I will bring John Ehrlichman down to his knees and put him in jail. I have done enough seamy things for he and Krogh, they'll never survive it."

P. Was he talking about Ellsberg? D. Ellsberg, and apparently some other things. I don't know the full extent of it. P. I don't know about anything else. D. I don't know either, and I hate to learn some of these things. So that is the situation. Now, where are at the soft points? How many people know about this? Well, let me go one step further in this whole thing. The Cubans that were used in the Watergate were also the same Cubans that Hunt and Liddy used for this California Ellsberg thing, for the break-in out there. So they are aware of that. How high their knowledge is, is something else. Hunt and Liddy, of course, are totally aware of it, of the fact that it is right out of the White House.

P. I don't know what the hell we did that for! D. I don't know either. . . .

D. There is the problem of the continued blackmail which will not only go on now, but it will go on while these people are in prison, and it will compound the obstruction of justice situation. It will cost money. It is dangerous. People around here are not pros at this sort of thing. This is the sort of thing Mafia people can do: washing money, getting clean money, and things like that. We just don't know about those things, because we are not criminals and not used to dealing in that business. P. That's right. D. It is a tough thing to know how to do.

P. Maybe it takes a gang to do that. D. That's right. There is a real problem as to whether we could even do it. Plus there is a real problem in raising money: Mitchell has been working on raising some money. He is one of the ones with the most to lose. But there is no denying the fact that the White House, in Ehrlichman, Haldeman and Dean are involved in some of the early money decisions.

P. How much money do you need? D. I would say these people are going to cost a million dollars over the next two years. P. We could get that. On the money, if you need the money you could get that. You could get a million dollars. You could get it in cash. I know where it could be gotten. It is not easy, but it could be done. But the question is who the hell would handle it? Any ideas on that?

D. That's right. Well, I think that is something that Mitchell ought to be charged with. P. I would think so too. D. And get some pros to help him. . . .

P. Just looking at the immediate problem, don't you think you have to handle Hunt's financial situation damn soon? D. I think that is—I talked with Mitchell about that last night and—P. It seems to me we have to keep the cap on the bottle that much, or we don't have any options. D. That's right. P. Either that or it all blows right now? D. That's the question. . . .

D. What really bothers me is this growing situation. As I say, it is growing because of the continued need to provide support for the Watergate people who are going to hold us up for everything we've got, and the need for some people to perjure themselves as they go down the road here. If this thing ever blows, then we are in a cover-up situation. I think it would be extremely damaging to you and the — P. Sure. The whole concept of administration justice. Which we cannot have!

D. That is what really troubles me. For example, what happens if it starts breaking, and they do find a criminal case against a Haldeman, a Dean, a Mitchell, an Ehrlichman? That is — P. If it really comes down to that, we would have to (unintelligible) some of the men.

D. That's right. I am coming down to what I really think, is that Bob and John and John Mitchell and I can sit down and spend a day, or however long, to figure out

one, how this can be carved away from you, so that it does not damage you or the presidency. It just can't! You are not involved in it and it is something you shouldn't—P. That is true!

P. Let's come back to this problem. What are your feelings yourself, John? You know what they are all saying. What are your feelings about the chances? D. I am not confident that we can ride through this. I think there are soft spots.

P. So what you really come to is what we do. Let's suppose that you and Haldeman and Ehrlichman and Mitchell say we can't hold this? What then are you going to say? What are you going to put out after it. Complete disclosure, isn't that the best way to do it? D. Well, one way to do it is —P. That would be my view.

D. One way to do it is for you to tell the Attorney General that you finally know. Really, this is the first time you are get-

ting all the pieces together. P. Ask for another Grand Jury? D. Ask for another Grand Jury. The way it should be done though, is a way—for example, I think that we could avoid criminal liability for countless people and the ones that did get it could be minimal. P. How? D. Well, I think by just thinking it all through first as to how. You know, some people could be granted immunity. . . .

P. No. Talking about your obstruction of justice, though, I don't see it. D. Well, I have been a conduit for information on taking care of people out there who are guilty of crimes. P. Oh, you mean like the blackmailers? D. The blackmailers. Right.

P. Well, I wonder if that part of it can't be—I wonder if that doesn't—let me put it frankly: I wonder if that doesn't have to be continued? Let me put it this way: let us suppose that you get the million bucks, and you get the proper way to handle it. You could hold that side? D. Uh, huh.

P. It would seem to me that would be worthwhile. D. Well, that's one problem. P. I know you have a problem here. You have the problem with Hunt and his clemency.

D. That's right. And you are going to have a clemency problem with the others. They all are going to expect to be out and that may put you in a position that is just untenable at some point. You know, the Watergate Hearings just over, Hunt now demanding clemency or he is going to blow. And politically, it's impossible for you to do it. You know, after everybody—P. That's right! D. I am not sure that you will ever be able to deliver on the clemency. It may be just too hot.

P. You can't do it politically until after the '74 elections, that's for sure. Your point is that even then you couldn't do it. D. That's right. It may further involve you in a way you should not be involved in this. P. No—it is wrong that's for sure. . . .

D. What I am coming in today with is: I don't have a plan on how to solve it right now, but I think it is at the juncture that we should begin to think in terms of how to cut the losses; how to minimize the further growth of this thing, rather than further compound it by, you know, ultimately paying these guys forever. I think we've got to look—

P. But at the moment, don't you agree it is better to get the Hunt thing that's where that—D. That is worth buying time on. P. That is buying time, I agree. . . .

P. Suppose the worst—that Bob is indicted and Ehrlichman is indicted. And I must say, we just better then try to tough it through. You get the point. D. That's right.

P. If they, for example, say let's cut our losses and you say we are going to go down the road to see if we can cut our losses and no more blackmail and all the rest. And then the thing blows cutting Bob and the rest to pieces. You would never recover from that, John. D. That's right.

P. It is better to fight it out. Then you see that's the other thing. It's better to fight it out and not let people testify, and so forth. And now, on the other hand, we realize that we have these weaknesses—that we have these weaknesses—in terms of blackmail. . . .

P. I think the most difficult problem are the guys who are going to jail. I think you are right about that. D. I agree. P. Now. And also the fact that we are not going to be able to give them clemency. D. That's right. How long will they take? How long will they sit there? I don't know. We don't know what they will be sentenced to. There's always a chance—

P. When could you have this meeting with these fellows as I think time is of the essence. Could you do it this afternoon?

D. Well, Mitchell isn't here. It might be worth it to have him come down. I think that Bob and John did not want to talk to John Mitchell about this, and I don't be-

lieve they have had any conversation with him about it. P. Well, I will get Haldeman in here now. . . .

(Haldeman enters the room)

P. I was talking to John about this whole situation and he said if we can get away from the bits and pieces that have broken out. He is right in recommending that there be a meeting at the very first possible time. . . . You can't do it today, can you?

D. I don't think so. I was suggesting a meeting with Mitchell. P. Mitchell, Ehrlichman, yourself and Bob, that is all. Now, Mitchell has to be there because he is seriously involved and we are trying to keep him with us. We have to see how we handle it from here on. We are in the process of having to determine which way to go, and John has thought it through as well as he can. . . .

P. What really has to happen is for you to sit down with those three and for you to tell them exactly what you told me. D. Uh, huh.

P. It may take him about 35 or 40 minutes. In other words he knows, John knows, about everything and also what all the potential criminal liabilities are, whether it is—like that thing—what, about obstruction? D. Obstruction of justice. Right. P. So forth and so on. I think that's best. Then we have to see what the line is. Whether the line is one of continuing to run a kind of stone wall, and take the heat from that, having in mind the fact that there are vulnerable points there;—the vulnerable points being, the first vulnerable points would be obvious. That would be one of the defendants, either Hunt, because he is most vulnerable in my opinion, might blow the whistle and his price is pretty high, but at least we can buy the time on that as I pointed out to John. . . .

P. The point is this, that it is now time, though, that Mitchell has got to sit down, and know where the hell all this thing stands, too. You see, John is concerned, as you know, about the Ehrlichman situation. It worries him a great deal because, and

this is why the Hunt problem is so serious, because it had nothing to do with the campaign. It has to do with the Ellsberg case. I don't know what the hell the—(unintelligible). . . .

D. He is playing hard ball. He wouldn't play hard ball unless he were pretty confident that he could cause an awful lot of grief. H. Right.

P. He is playing hard ball with regard to Ehrlichman for example, and that sort of thing. He knows what he's got. H. What's he planning on, money? D. Money and — H. Really?

P. It's about \$120,000. That's what, Bob. That would be easy. It is not easy to deliver, but it is easy to get. Now, H. If the case is just that way, then the thing to do if the thing cranks out.

P. If, for example, you say look we are not going to continue to—let's say, frankly, on the assumption that if we continue to cut our losses, we are not going to win. But in the end, we are going to be bled to death. And in the end, it is all going to come out anyway. Then you get the worst of both worlds. We are going to lose, and people are going to — H. And look like dopes!

P. And in effect, look like a cover-up. So that we can't do. Now the other line, however, if you take that line, that we are not going to continue to cut our losses, that means then we have to look square in the eye as to what the hell those losses are, and see which people can—so we can avoid criminal liability. Right?

D. Right.

P. And that means keeping it off you. Herb has started this Justice thing. We've got to keep it off Herb. You have to keep it, naturally, off of Bob, off Chapin, if possible, Strachan, right? D. Uh, huh. P. And Mitchell. Right? D. Uh, huh.

H. And Magruder, if you can. P. John Dean's point is that if Magruder goes down, he will pull everybody with him. . . .

P. Another way to do it then Bob, and John realizes this, is to continue to try to cut our losses. Now we have to take a look at that course of action. First it is going to require approximately a million dollars to take care of the jackasses who are in jail. That can be arranged. That could be arranged. But you realize that after we are gone, and assuming we can expend this money, then they are going to crack and it would be an unseemly story. Frankly, all the people aren't going to care that much. D. That's right.

P. People won't care, but people are going to be talking about it, there is no question. And the second thing is, we are not going to be able to deliver on any of a clemency thing. . . .

P. Now let me tell you. We could get the money. There is no problem in that. We can't provide the clemency. Money could be provided. Mitchell could provide the way to deliver it. That could be done. See what I mean? . . .

P. Well, it sounds like a lot of money, a million dollars. Let me say that I think we could get that. I know money is hard to raise. But the point is, what we do on that—Let's look at the hard problem—

D. That has been, thus far, the most difficult problem. That is why these fellows have been on and off the reservation all the way along.

P. So the hard place is this. Your feeling at the present time is the hell with the million dollars. I would just say to these fellows I am sorry it is all off and let them talk. Alright? D. Well, —

P. That's the way to do it isn't it, if you want to do it clean?

H. That's the way. We can live with it, because the problem with the blackmailing, that is the thing we kept raising with you when you said there was a money problem. When you said we need \$20,000, or \$100,000, or something. We said yeah, that is what you need today. But what do you need tomorrow or next year or five years from now? . . .

D. One of the things that I think we all need to discuss is, is there some way that we can get our story before a Grand Jury, so that they can really have investigated the White House on this. I must say that I have not really thought through that alternative. We have been so busy on the other containment situation.

P. John Ehrlichman, of course, has raised the point of another Grand Jury. I just don't know how you could do it. On what basis, I could call for it, but I — D. That would be out of the question.

P. I hate to leave with differences in view of all this stripped land. I could understand this, but I think I want another Grand Jury proceeding and we will have the White House appear before them. Is that right John? D. Uh, huh.

P. That is the point, see. Of course! That would make the difference. I want everybody in the White House called. And that gives you a reason not to have to go before the Ervin and Baker committee. It puts it in an Executive session, in a sense. H. Right. D. That's right.

H. And there would be some rules of evidence, aren't there? D. There are rules of evidence.

P. Rules of evidence and you have lawyers. H. You are in a hell of a lot better position than you are up there.

D. No, you can't have a lawyer before the Grand Jury. P. Oh, no. That's right.

H. But you do have rules of evidence. You can refuse to talk.

D. You can take the 5th Amendment. P. That's right.

H. You can say you have forgotten, too, can't you? D. Sure but you are chancing a very high risk for perjury situation.

P. But you can say I don't remember. You can say I can't recall. I can't give any answer to that that I can recall.

H. You have the same perjury thing on the Hill don't you? D. That's right. P. Oh hell, yes.

H. And the Ervin committee is a hell of a lot worse to deal with. D. That's right.

P. Suppose we have a Grand Jury thing. What would that do to the Ervin committee? Would it go right ahead? D. Probably. Probably. . . .

D. No. Well, that is one possibility. But also when these people go back before the Grand Jury here, they are going to pull all these criminal defendants back before the Grand Jury and immunize them. P. Who will do this? D. The U.S. Attorney's Office will. P. To do what?

D. To let them talk about anything further they want to talk about. P. But what do they gain out of it? D. Nothing.

P. To hell with it!

D. They're going to stonewall it, as it now stands. Excepting Hunt. That's why his threat. H. It's Hunt opportunity.

P. That's why for your immediate

things you have no choice but to come up with the \$120,000, or whatever it is. Right? D. That's right.

P. Would you agree that that's the prime thing that you damn well better get that done?

P. Could I suggest this though: let me go back around — H. Be careful —

P. The Grand Jury thing has a feel. Right? It says we are cooperating well with the Grand Jury.

D. Once we start down any route that involves the criminal justice system, we've got to have full appreciation that there is really no control over that. . . .

P. But you see the Grand Jury proceeding achieves this thing. If we go down that road — (unintelligible). We would be cooperating. We would be cooperating through a Grand Jury. Everybody would be behind us. That is the proper way to do this. It should be done in the Grand Jury, not up there under the kleig lights of the committee. Nobody questions a Grand Jury. And then we would insist on Executive Privilege before the committee, flat out say, "No we won't do that. It is a matter before the Grand Jury, and so on, and that's that." . . .

P. Now, the other possibility is not to go to the Grand Jury. We have three things. (1) You just say the hell with it, we can't raise the money, sorry Hunt you can say what you want, and so on. He blows the whistle. Right? D. Right.

P. If that happens, that raises some possibilities about some criminal liabilities, because he is likely to say a hell of a lot of things and will certainly get Magruder in on it. D. It will get Magruder. It will start the whole FBI investigation going again. . . .

P. Seems we're going around the track. You have no choice on Hunt but to try to keep — D. Right now, we have no choice.

P. But my point is, do you ever have any choice on Hunt? That is the point. No matter what we do here now, John, whatever he wants if he doesn't get it — immunity, etc., he is going to blow the whistle.

D. What I have been trying to conceive of is how we could lay out everything we know in a way that we have told the Grand Jury or somebody else, so that if a Hunt blows, so what's new? It's already been told to a Grand Jury and they found no criminal liability and they investigated it in full. . . .

P. But here is the point, John. Let's go the other angle, is to decide if you open up the Grand Jury: first, it won't be any good, it won't be believed. And then you will have two things going: the Grand Jury and the other things, committee, etc. The Grand Jury appeals to me from the standpoint, the President makes the move. All these charges being bandied about, etc., the best thing to do is that I have asked the Grand Jury to look into any further charges. All charges have been raised. That is the place to do it, and not before a committee of the Congress. Right? D. Yeah.

P. Then, however, we may say, (expletive deleted), we can't risk that, or she'll break loose there. That leaves you to your third thing. D. Hunker down and fight it.

P. Hunker down and fight it and what happens? Your view is that is not really a viable option. D. It is a high risk. It is a very high risk.

P. Your view is that what will happen on it, that it's going to come out. That something is going to break loose, and — D. Something is going to break and — P. It will look like the President D. Is covering up. . . .

P. The other alternative is — D. Yes, the other choices. P. As a matter of fact, your middle ground of Grand Jury. . . .

P. If we said that the reason we had delayed this is until after the sentencing — You see that the point is that the reason time is of the essence, we can't play around on this. If they are going to sentence on Friday, we are going to have to move on the (expletive deleted) thing pretty fast. See what I mean? D. That's right.

P. So we really have a time problem.

D. The other thing is that the Attorney General could call Sirica, and say that, "The government has some major developments that it is considering. Would you hold sentencing for two weeks?" If we set ourselves on a course of action, P. Yep, yep. . . .

P. You could recommend it and he could come over and I would say, "Now Petersen, we want you to get to the bottom of the damn thing. Call another Grand Jury or anything else. Correct? Well, now you gotta know whether Kleindienst can get Sirica to hold off. Right? Second, you have to get Mitchell down here. And you and Ehrlichman and Mitchell by tomorrow.

P. Alright. Fine. And my point is that I think it is good, frankly, to consider these various options. . . . The erosion is inevitably going to come here, apart from anything and all the people saying well the Watergate isn't a major issue. It isn't. But it will be. It's bound to. (Unintelligible) has to go out. Delaying is the great danger to the White House area. We don't, I say that the White House can't do it. Right?

D. Yes, Sir.
