

President's Remarks: Dean 'a Loose Cannon'

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John Dean was "a loose cannon." Pat Gray just "isn't very smart." John Mitchell wasn't minding the store and Chuck Colson talked too much. The Cuban burglars were a bunch of "jackasses." Len Garment tended to hit the panic button. Gordon Liddy was "crazy."

These were some of the judgments, acid and unsparring, delivered by the President as he pondered within the Oval Office how to keep the unraveling Watergate conspiracy and cover-up from enveloping "the presidency."

Appropriately enough, the President's one summary characterization of the Watergate conspiracy on April 18, 1973, was—"inaudible."

President Nixon's perceptions of the men around him were sharply influenced by the shifting currents of political and criminal liability as the Watergate scandal unfolded.

On March 13, for example, the President told John W. Dean III that he doubted his former Attorney General and Wall Street colleague John N. Mitchell, knew about the "dirty tricks" operations in the 1972 re-election campaign.

Slightly more than a month later, on April 17, the President asked his deputy attorney general, Henry E. Petersen, what he would do if he were Mitchell—and then provides his own devastating answer:

"Poison."

The bear market in presidential affection was particularly savage in its effect on L. Patrick Gray III, the President's nominee to head the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Gray, Mr. Nixon's choice to replace the late J. Edgar Hoover as acting FBI director in 1972, was a dirty word in the White House even as the Senate was acting on his nomination.

On March 22 the President gathered with his chief advisers and John D. Ehrlichman reported Gray's nomination prospects were considered on Capitol Hill to be "dead on the floor." Laughter is recorded in the White House transcript when John Dean quips: "Maybe someone will shoot him."

After hearing Gray savaged by Ehrlichman, Haldeman and Dean for ineptitude in dealing with White House involvements in the Watergate case the President ruminated: "... the problem with him (Gray) is I think he is a little stupid."

Only once does the President speak wistfully of his determination to stand by those of his men who had run afoul of the scandal. In an April 14, 1973 phone conversation with Ehrlichman Mr. Nixon exclaimed:

"... Whatever we say about Harry Truman, etc., while it hurt him a lot of people admired the old bastard for standing by people ... who were guilty as hell ... and damn it I am that kind of person. I am not one who is going to say, look, while this guy is under attack, I drop him..."

The President was referring to Haldeman who was becoming implicated in the covert funneling of money to the Watergate defendants.

Haldeman and Ehrlichman, who were the two men most privy to presidential secrets, were the only subordinates to whom Mr. Nixon voiced unstinting support through the hundreds of hours of conversation recorded on the White House transcripts.

But even then, as the Watergate tide surged closer and closer to the Oval Office, the President clinically discussed with Haldeman and Ehrlichman the necessity for their departures in order to conserve "the presidency."

And Ehrlichman coldly spoke of himself and Haldeman as "damaged goods" during a three-way conversation with the President 13 days before their resignation and Dean's firing was publicly announced.

"Right," the President agreed, "you can't go back in the government, but I will tell you one thing, you are not damaged goods as far as I am concerned." He assured them, nonetheless, that "I would like both of you to consider 50 per cent of your time for editing, etcetera and so on, with the foundation. The foundation is going to be a hell of a big thing."

While Haldeman and Ehrlichman are the solid bricks of dependability, ready to render themselves inoperative in the President's service, others are found wanting.

Take Leonard Garment, for example, the President's clarinet-playing former Wall Street law colleague. "Len always reacts to things," the President complained to Haldeman and Ehrlichman of Garment's strong feeling in April, 1973, that the two chieftain presidential aides should be removed.

Mr. Nixon agreed with Haldeman's observation that "Len is the panic-button

type." And he vented his displeasure when Haldeman informed him that "Garment took it upon himself to go meet with Henry (Kissinger) and Al Haig to discuss his concern about the whole situation..."

"Well, what the hell did he do that for?" the President testily asked.

"On the basis that he thought there was a real danger and threat to the presidency..." Haldeman answered.

Kissinger got his information on the serious turn of Watergate developments from Garment and not the President, the transcript of Mr. Nixon's remarks show.

The priority of Haldeman's advice, despite his heavy implication in Watergate, over Kissinger's was persuasively demonstrated in this exchange:

"I think Len's (Garment) view is that what you need is a bold, new, you know, really some kind of a dramatic move. Henry feels that, but Henry feels that you should go on television," said Haldeman.

"Do you think I should do the 9 o'clock news," the President asked.

"On this, no," Haldeman replied.

"I don't think so either," the President concurred.

One of the minor themes sounded in the transcripts of the White House conversations was the ITT antitrust case. Although the administration had long insisted that it had not interfered with the Justice De-

partment's deliberations in the \$2 billion merger case, the transcript quotes this remark of Mr. Nixon:

"(Unintelligible) we had a runaway Antitrust Division at that point... Yeah, and I had been raising hell with McLaren... on all this, and I said now this is a violation of my policy." Richard McLaren used to head the Justice Department's antitrust division.

What was at issue in the politically controversial case was McLaren's last-minute turnaround in mid-1971 allowing ITT to maintain its merger with the \$2 billion Hartford Insurance Co. The settlement coincided with negotiations under which ITT board chairman Harold Geneen agreed to provide up to \$400,000 for the 1972 Republican convention site.

As the Watergate sluices opened wider and wider, the President's reactions altered from a form of tough bravado to visible desperation.

On April 14, 1973, he offered words of consolation to Haldeman and Ehrlichman, who were to attend that night the White House correspondents dinner and witness the award of a prize to "Bernstein and what's his name" as Ehrlichman put it—for their Watergate coverage. (He was referring to Washington Post reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward).

"Well," assured the President, "a year from now. It will soon be different."

"Oh yeah," exclaimed Ehrlichman.

"Nope seriously. . . sooner than you think. Let me tell you, John, the thing about all this that has concerned me is dragging the damn thing out. Dragging it out and . . . having it the only issue in town. Now the thing to do now, have done. Indict Mitchell and all the rest and there'll be a horrible two weeks. . ."

By April there is a note of anguish in the President's observation. He spoke of resignation for the first time in the thousands of words of transcript.

The scene was the Oval Office where he sat with his press secretary, Ronald L. Ziegler, and Assistant Attorney General Henry E. Petersen.

He exhorted Ziegler to "take a hard line" with inquiring reporters.

"Anything on that they better watch their damned cotton-picking faces," the President said. "Because boy, if there's one thing in this case as Henry will tell you, since March 21 when I had that conversation with Dean, I have broken my ass to try to get the facts of this case. Right?"

(This probably ranked as the foremost undeleted expletive of the transcript.)

At that point the President seemed to explode out of the tight, poker table dialogue of the White House transcripts into the closest semblance of an emotional outburst.

"Crack down," he demanded. "If there's one thing you have got to do, you have got to maintain the presidency out of this. I have got things to do for this country and I'm not going to have—now, this is personal.

"I sometimes feel like I'd like to resign. Let Agnew be President for a while. He'd love it."