

Cover-Up II

5/3/74

NYT

In his public statements, President Nixon has insisted that, once apprised of the Watergate cover-up on March 21, 1973, he bent every effort toward full disclosure. The second installment of the transcripts of the White House tapes as published yesterday in The Times offers persuasive proof that, far from aiming at disclosure, the huddles in the Oval Office sought feverishly to keep the truth from reaching the American people.

Two related themes run through these strategy sessions: (a) how to manipulate the investigations by Congress and the courts; (b) who among the President's embattled crew might have to be sacrificed to protect the others.

The mood in the White House is illustrated by a tactical proposal, advanced on March 27, to outflank the Senate Watergate Committee and the courts by establishing a special Presidential commission to assume sole responsibility over the investigation.

Did such a proposal represent an effort to see justice done? As portrayed by Mr. Haldeman, the advantages were that "it will take the panel a long time to get set up . . . and make its findings and then you'll probably be past the '74 elections which'll be desirable" and that "the President maintains the ultimate stroke on it, because he always has the option on Jan. 19 [1977] to pardon anybody . . ." This reference to a Presidential pardon, a day before the end of Mr. Nixon's second term, is a laundered version of executive clemency.

What worried Mr. Nixon about that plan was not its transparent attempt to prolong the cover-up. Instead, he raised the question: "And what if [Senator Sam] Ervin would say, 'well I'll hold my hearings in abeyance on Watergate, but not on other things'?"

The goal of any of the schemes under discussion was, as Mr. Ehrlichman put it, to "insulate" the President and "also to have some symbolic act of absolution after the thing is over, by being able to take them [the temporarily suspended White House aides] back on." Not all of the palace guard, however, were to be so fortunate.

The Ehrlichman-Haldeman vise had already been closed around John Dean during the meeting on March 22. The script that was being prepared for John Mitchell, in his absence, was that he was regrettably responsible for not stopping the Watergate burglars when he carelessly authorized unspecified political espionage. (Haldeman: "He is as high up as they've got.") Jeb Magruder, Mr. Ehrlichman assured the President, could be stared down and "it'll bend—it'll bend mm." On April 8, Mr. Nixon recommended that Mr. Magruder plead the Fifth Amendment.

These are not words one associates with efforts to get at the truth. There was no hint of either justice or propriety. The tone of the meetings speaks for itself. The talk was of "getting [Senator Howard] Baker programmed for cooperation," if the Senate hearings could not be prevented. Mr. Ehrlichman observes to the President: ". . . symbolically you've got to do something."

Right or wrong are never the issues. The question is merely what will or will not "sell." Even with their frequent and inexplicable deletions of "materials unrelated to Presidential actions" the transcripts lay bare the shambles of the nation's highest office.