

The Tangled Web

Nixon and Aides Tried To Keep the Lid On, But Nothing Worked

Texts Show They Debated Whether to Tell It All Or Resort to 'Stonewall'

'Make It Very Incomplete'

By CAROL H. FALK

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
WASHINGTON—The White House transcripts chronicle an intriguing array of maneuvers aimed at keeping the lid on Watergate and convey President Nixon's feelings of increasing helplessness as none of them worked.

The quantity and diversity of the maneuvers to contain the scandal form a pattern

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extending through many meetings between Mr. Nixon and his top aides—not just the controversial March 21 session that Mr. Nixon himself has described as ambiguous.

And the suggestions for duplicity entertained by and sometimes proposed by the President occur in contexts that appear to contradict Mr. Nixon's contention that he was simply playing devil's advocate or asking leading questions.

The President and his aides first relied on strategies that were passive in nature—concentrating on how to tell as little as possible to the press, the prosecutors and Senate Watergate committee investigators. They also spent a good deal of time worrying about whether lower-ranking White House or Nixon reelection-committee aides would be able to stick to their stories of non-involvement when they were pressured to implicate higher-ups.

Discussing Sacrifices

As it became evident that the questions wouldn't stop coming, more active ways of dealing with the mounting scandal were explored. One suggestion was that White House counsel John Dean would write a report, although the President cautioned him to "make it very incomplete." They pondered which of the President's associates should be sacrificed, and they rehearsed the lines that each aide could use in his own defense.

They even wrestled with the idea of a presidentially appointed panel to conduct secret trials. But every solution was less than a total answer, and they dug themselves in deeper and deeper.

As that happened, Mr. Nixon became increasingly frustrated. In a late-night phone call on April 14, 1973, he told his chief of staff H. R. Haldeman: "I just don't know how it is going to come out. That is the whole point, and I just don't know." Two

days later, in the midst of a strategy meeting, he lamented: "I'm so sick of this thing."

The President's difficulties were compounded each time he learned more and decided to tell less about the involvement of his aides in the June 1972 Watergate break-in and the subsequent cover-up. His dilemma is illustrated by a conversation he had with his counsel, John Dean, on March 13, 1973, when Dean suggested taking a "here it all is" approach:

President: And let it all hang out.

Dean: And let it all hang out. Let's with a (confessed dirty-trickster Donald) Segretti — etc.

President: We have passed that point.

Dean: Plus the fact, they are not going to believe the truth! That is the incredible thing!

Later in that same meeting — which was eight days before Mr. Nixon says Dean first told him about the cover-up — Dean reviewed for the President some of those involved:

President: Now where the hell, or how much (Presidential appointments secretary Dwight) Chapin knew I will be (expletive deleted) if I know.

Who Knew What?

Dean: Chapin didn't know anything about the Watergate.

President: Don't you think so?

Dean: Absolutely not.

President: (White House aide Gordon) Strachan?

Dean: Yes.

President: He knew?

Dean: Yes.

President: About the Watergate?

Dean: Yes.

President: Well, then, he probably told Bob (Haldeman, the President's chief of staff). He may not have.

Dean: He was judicious in what he relayed, but Strachan is as tough as nails. He can go in and stonewall, and say, "I don't know anything about what you are talking about." He has already done it twice you know, in interviews.

President: I guess he should, shouldn't he? I suppose we can't call that justice, can we?

Dean: Well, it is a personal loyalty to him. He doesn't want it any other way. He didn't have to be told. He didn't have to be asked. It just is something that he found was the way he wanted to handle the situation.

President: But he knew? He knew about Watergate? Strachan did?

Dean: Yes.

Haldeman's "Weak Links"

President: I will be damned! Well that is the problem in Bob's case. Not Chapin, then, but Strachan. Strachan worked for him, didn't he?

Dean: Yes. They would have one hell of a time proving that Strachan had knowledge of it, though.

President: Who knew better? (Nixon reelection official Jeb) Magruder?

Dean: Magruder and (convicted Watergate conspirator G. Gordon) Liddy.

President: Oh, I see. The other weak link for Bob is Magruder. He hired him, et cetera.

Dean: That applies to (former Attorney

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General and Nixon campaign manager John) Mitchell, too.

President: Mitchell — Magruder. Where do you see (former White House special counsel Charles) Colson coming into it? Do you think he knew quite a bit and yet, he could know quite a great deal about a lot of other things and not know a lot about this. I don't know.

Dean: Well I have never —

President: He sure as hell knows Hunt. That we know. Was very close to him.

Dean: Chuck (Colson) has told me that he had no knowledge, specific knowledge, of the Watergate before it occurred. There have been tidbits that I have raised with Chuck. I have not played any games with him. I said, "Chuck, I have indications —"

President: What indications? The lawyer has to know everything.

Dean: That's right. I said, "Chuck, people have said that you were involved in this, involved in that, involved in all of this. He said, "That is not true, etc." I think that Chuck had knowledge that something was going on over there, but he didn't have any knowledge of the details of the specifics of the whole thing (presumably, the planting of the bug in Democratic headquarters in the Watergate office building).

President: There must have been an indication of the fact that we had poor pickings. Because naturally anybody, either Chuck or Bob, were always reporting to me about what was going on. If they ever got any information they would certainly have told me that we got some information, but they never had a thing to report. What was the matter? Did they never get anything out of the damn thing?

Dean: I don't think they ever got anything, sir.

President: A dry hole?

Dean: That's right.

President: (Expletive deleted).

Dean: Well, they were just really getting started.

After that the conversation turned to the advisability of disclosing everything:

President: Is it too late to go the hang-out road?

Dean: Yes, I think it is. The hang-out road —

President: The hang-out road (inaudible).

Dean: It was kicked around Bob and I and —

President: (Chief White House domestic aide John) Ehrlichman always felt it should be hang-out.

'There Are Dangers, Mr. President'

Dean: Well, I think I convinced him why he would not want to hang-out either. There is a certain domino situation here. If some things start going, a lot of other things are going to start going, and there can be a lot of problems if everything starts falling. So there are dangers, Mr. President. I would be less than candid if I didn't tell you there are. There is a reason for not everyone going up and testifying.

President: I see. Oh no, no, no! I didn't mean to have everyone go up and testify.

Dean: Well I mean they're just starting to hang-out and say here's our story —

President: I mean put the story out PR people, here is the story, the true story about Watergate.

More discussion of how to handle inquiries, such as those posed by the Senate Watergate committee's investigation, took place during a March 20, 1973, telephone conversation between the President and Dean:

Dean: We are and we are coming to — the more we work on it the more questions we see —

President: That you don't want to answer huh?

Dean: That bring problems by answering.

President: And so you are coming up, then, with the idea of just a stonewall then? Is that —

Dean: That's right.

President: Is that what you come down with?

Dean: Stonewall, with lots of noises that we are always willing to cooperate, but no one is asking us for anything.

Further plans were made during that same phone conversation:

President: No, I want to know. I want to know where all the bodies are first.

Dean: And then, once you decide after that, we can program it anyway you want to do it.

President: Yeah. Because I think for example, you could do it orally, even if you don't want to make the written statement. You could do it orally before the Cabinet, the leaders and the rest. Lay it all out. You see, I would not be present. You just lay it all out and I just — see what I mean?

Mr. Nixon's Suggestion

It was during the course of this phone conversation that the President came up with the idea of having Dean "just make a statement to me" that can be used "for internal purposes and to answer questions, etc." But he had a specific kind of statement in mind:

President: You've got to have something where it doesn't appear that I am doing this in, you know, just in a — saying to hell with the Congress and to hell with the people, we are not going to tell you anything because of executive privilege. That, they don't understand. But if you say, "No, we are willing to cooperate," and you've made a complete statement, but make it very incomplete. See, that is what I mean. I don't want a, too much in chapter and verse as you did in your letter, I just want just a general —

Dean: An all around statement.

President: That's right. Try just something general. Like "I have checked into this matter; I can categorically, based on my investigation, the following: Haldeman is not involved in this, that and the other thing. Mr. Colson did not do this; Mr. so and so did not do this. Mr. Blank did not do this." Right down the line, taking the most glaring things. If there are any further questions, please let me know. See?

The next day, during their comprehensive March 21 discussions of the cover-up, Dean was able to report to the President that White House aide Gordon Strachan, when questioned by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, "appeared, as a result of some coaching, to be the dumbest paper pusher in the bowels of the White House."

'A Cancer Around the Presidency'

More discussion of the proposed Dean report took place in a second meeting, which occurred that evening between the President, Mr. Haldeman, Mr. Ehrlichman and Dean. Mr. Ehrlichman commented to Dean that "the President is in a stronger position later, if he can be shown to have justifiably relied on you at this point in time." And the

President chimed in that Dean could lend authority to his report by saying he was present for the FBI interviews of White House aides "and that you, yourself, conducted interviews of the following people. I am just trying to think of people, et cetera, that you can list," Mr. Nixon added.

The report plan prompts some debate, however:

Dean: Well, I see in this conversation what I have talked about before. They do not ultimately solve what I see as a grave problem of a cancer growing around the presidency. This creates another problem. It does not clean the problem out.

President: Well,

Ehrlichman: But doesn't it permit the President to clean it out at such time as it does come up? By saying, "Indeed, I relied on it. And now this later thing turns up, and I don't condone that. And if I had known that before, obviously I would have run it down."

President: Here's what John is to. You really think you've got to clean the cancer out now, right?

Dean: Yes sir.

President: How would you do that? Do you see another way? Without breaking down our executive privilege?

Dean: I see a couple of ways to do it.

President: You certainly don't want to do it at the Senate, do you?

Dean: No sir, I think that would be an added trap.

President: That's the worst thing. Right. We've got to do it. We aren't asked to do it.

Getting Credit, Getting Hurt

Dean: You've got to do it, to get the credit for it. That gets you above it. As I see it, naturally you'll get hurt and I hope we can find the answer to that problem.

Ehrlichman: Alright, suppose we did this? Supposing you write a report to the President on everything you know about this. And the President then, prior to seeing it, says "Did you send the report over to the Justice Department?" When it goes he says, (unintelligible) has been at work on this. My counsel has been at work on this. Here are his findings."

President: Where would you start? I don't know where it stops. (White House press secretary Ronald) Ziegler? The Vice President?

Dean at one point suggested that for purposes of the report they could "draw numbers with names out of a hat to see who gets hurt and who doesn't. That sounds about as fair as you can be, because anyone can get hurt." The next afternoon, March 22, 1973, Dean talks about the idea of giving copies of the report to Attorney General Richard Kleindienst and Senate Watergate committee chairman Sam Ervin: "I am not talking about documents you see. I am talking about something we can spread as facts. You see you could even write a novel with the facts."

Looking for Excuses

Mr. Nixon has said that after he learned the extent of the cover-up and Dean's involvement in it on March 21, 1973, his whole objective was to "find the truth." But the very next day he was helping to find excuses for Dean:

President: You were our investigator. You were directed by the President to get me all the facts. Second, as White House counsel you were on it to assist people in the executive branch who were being questioned. Say you were there for the purpose of getting information. That was your job.

Dean: That's right.

President: But the main point certainly is that Dean had absolutely no operational activity. The wonderful thing about your position is that as far as they are concerned — your position has never never been as operative.

Haldeman: That is true — that even in the private sessions then — you volunteered to give them a statement on the whole question of your recommendation of Liddy which is the only point of possible kind of substantive culpability that you could have and now you can satisfy all of those actions — that is if you want to.

President: At the President's direction you have never done anything operational, you have always acted as counsel. We've got to keep our eye on the Dean thing — just give them some of it — not all of it.

On occasion the solutions offered become a bit ostrich-like, as when Mr. Haldeman came up with a way to avoid being subpoenaed by the Senate Watergate committee: "We move to Camp David and hide! They can't get in there."

"Well, go ahead," the President responds.

'A Limited Hang Out'

Then the March 22 meeting resumes a more serious tone as Mr. Ehrlichman warns his colleagues: "You have to bottom your defense, your position on the report. And the report says nobody was involved, and you have to stay consistent with that."

Toward the end of that session they appear to have decided on a middle course:

President: Do you think we want to go this route now? Let it hang out so to speak?

Dean: Well, it isn't really that —

Haldeman: It's a limited hang out.

Dean: It is a limited hang out. It's not an absolute hang out.

President: But some of the questions look big hanging out publicly or privately.

Dean: What it is doing, Mr. President, is getting you up above and away from it. That is the most important thing.

Lines of Defense

The defenses that each of his associates might be able to use concerned President Nixon in a meeting on March 27 with Messrs. Haldeman, Ehrlichman and Ziegler:

President: You know Mitchell could be telling the truth and Liddy could be too. Liddy just assumed he had abstract approval Mitchell could say, "I know I never approved this damn plan." You've got to figure the lines of defenses that everybody's going to take here. That's Mitchell's. Right? What's Haldeman's line of defense? Haldeman's line of defense, "I never approved anything of the sort. I just" — you know that — what's Ehrlichman's? There is no doubt he knows nothing about it. The earlier thing — yes. We did have an operation for leaks, etc. What would you say if they said, "Did you ever do any wiretapping?" That is a question they will ask. Were you aware of any wiretapping?

Ehrlichman: Yes.

President: You would say, "Yes." Then, "Why did you do it?" You would say it was ordered on a national security basis.

Ehrlichman: National security. We had a series of very serious national security leaks.

During the March 27 meeting Mr. Halde-

man brought up an idea for a system of dealing with Watergate defendants in a manner resembling the Star Chamber that Britain abolished back in the 17th Century.

He called it a "super panel." It was to be appointed by the President to hold secret trials of all accused persons who would first "voluntarily" waive their right to trial by jury. According to Mr. Haldeman, the panel would be "empowered to act to remove anybody that it sees fit because of involvement, to level fines and to impose criminal sanctions."

Though its judgments were to be published after the fact, the panel would "proceed in secret and their decisions will be final and not subject to appeal" — including no appeal to the nation's regular judiciary system.

Mr. Haldeman saw several advantages in this. He told the President: "It will take the panel a long time to get set up, get its processes worked out, get its hearings done and make its findings and then you'll probably be past the '74 elections which'll be desirable. Secondly, the President maintains the ultimate stroke on it because he always has the option on January 19 to pardon anybody who (unintelligible) a pardon. So the potential ultimate penalty anybody would get hit in this process could be about two years. His view would be to put — you need to get someone on the panel who knows politics."

'What Is Mitchell's Option?'

Mr. Nixon wasn't enthusiastic about the "super panel," the transcript indicates. "Wonder if the President has the power to set up such a thing?" he asked. "Can he do that sort of thing? You know, that's the whole point. I don't think so."

But Mr. Nixon did decide to explore the panel idea further. He picked then-Secretary of State and former Attorney General William P. Rogers as its organizer. As Mr. Haldeman told the President: "You see you are saying Bill (Rogers) would publicly be the father of this."

The discussion ended with the President telling Mr. Haldeman to get Secretary Rogers to the White House for a talk about the panel concept. What happened to the idea remains unclear.

Later on during the March 27 meeting, Mr. Nixon ponders the course open to his former campaign manager:

President: Well, what is Mitchell's option though? You mean to say — let's see what he could do. Does Mitchell come in and say, "My memory was faulty. I lied?"

Ehrlichman: No. He can't say that. He says — ah, ah —

President: "That without intending to, I may have been responsible for this, and I regret it very much but I did not realize what they were up to. They were — we were — talking about apples and oranges." That's what I think he would say. Don't you agree?

Haldeman: I think so. He authorized apples and they bought oranges. Yeah.

'Just Stare Him Down'

The President and his top aides also worried about who had "stroke" with Jeb Magruder, who they feared was about to confess all to the prosecutors:

Ehrlichman: I think the stroke Bob (Haldeman) has with him is in the confrontation to say, "Jeb, you know that just plain isn't so," and just stare him down on some of this stuff and it is a golden opportunity to do that. And I think you will only have this one opportunity to do it.

President: (Unintelligible) said it isn't so before.

Ehrlichman: That's all the better, and in his present frame of mind I am sure he will rationalize himself into a fable that hangs together. But if he knows that you are going to righteously and indignantly deny it, ah —

President: Say that he is trying to lie to save his own skin.

Ehrlichman: It'll bend — it'll bend him.

Haldeman: Well, but I can make a personal point of view in the other direction, and say, "Jeb, for God's sake don't get yourself screwed up by — solving one lie with a second. You've got a problem. You ain't going to make it better by making it worse."

However, the situation did worry them:

President: John, do you see any way though, any way, that Magruder can stick to his story? No.

Ehrlichman: Yes, because he's an ingenious —

President: Stick to his story?

Ehrlichman: He is an ingenious witness. I think, I am told, if he really is as good as they say he is as a witness, it is possible that he could get away with it. Ah, it's arguable.

'I'm So Sick of This Thing'

At one point on March 27 Mr. Nixon ponders the wisdom of sending everyone at the White House to testify before the grand jury, waiving executive privilege in the process. But this idea is quickly shot down:

President: Now Colson disagrees with that one, doesn't he?

Haldeman: He says you're nuts.

Discouragement begins to mount during the next month although Mr. Nixon allows himself some cautious optimism in an April 14 phone conversation with Mr. Haldeman:

President: No, we, at least I think now, we pretty much know what the worst is. I don't know what the hell else they could have that is any worse. You know what I mean. Unless there is something that I don't know, unless somebody's got a piece of paper that somebody signed or some damn thing, but that I doubt.

However, two days later his bitterness comes through as he discusses what to tell wire-service reporters about Watergate:

President: Just give it to the wires. Say gentlemen you wonder what the President has been doing? — where is he today? — he's in the EOB (Executive Office Building). But I want them to know that since the 21st I've been working my tail off, which I have, — I — I'm so sick of this thing. — I want to get it done with and over, and I don't want to hear about it again. Well I'll hear about it a lot, but I've got to run the country, too. (Ziegler leaves)

Perhaps the ultimate in frustration is expressed on April 27, when Mr. Nixon tells assistant attorney general Henry Petersen: "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."