

Probers' Version Of Nixon Tapes

Significant Quotes on Coverup

Washington WXP

Significant passages omitted from the White House version of a key presidential conversation show that President Nixon encouraged his top aides to continue the Watergate coverup.

"I don't give a s--- what happens," Mr. Nixon said. "I want you all to stonewall it, let them plead the Fifth Amendment, cover up or anything else if it'll save it — save the plan. That's the whole point."

This statement was part of a March 22, 1973, conversation in the White House released yesterday by the House Judiciary Committee, and omitted entirely from a transcript provided by the White House to the Watergate special prosecutor last January and subsequently to the committee and the public.

The omitted conversation apparently was obtained from the end of a tape turned over to the committee March 26 by the Watergate Grand Jury.

Many other significant discrepancies — most of them damaging to the President's impeachment defense — emerged from the Judiciary Committee version of eight presidential conversations.

In the same March 22 conversation, for example, the

President speaks of what he calls former Attorney General John N. Mitchell's argument "That we use flexibility in order to get on with the coverup plan."

The two references to the "coverup plan" made by Mr. Nixon in the March 22 conversation are the only time these words are used by the President in the transcripts. They are never defined but are an apparent reference to containing the

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Watergate scandal within the White House.

The White House version of the transcripts quotes Mr. Nixon as saying "that now we use flexibility in order to get off the coverup line."

The Judiciary Committee version of the transcripts, obtained from higher quality equipment than was used by the White House for its version, gives the picture of a President who is more knowledgeable and more in charge than the presidential portrait that emerges from the White House transcripts.

However, both versions depict a President who frequently contradicts himself in discussing Watergate options.

For example, immediately after he instructed Mitchell, then-White House Counsel John W. Dean III and chief of staff H. R. (Bob) Haldeman to "stonewall it" during the March 22 conversation, the President said:

"On the other hand, uh, uh, I would prefer, as I said to you, that you do it the other way. And I would particularly prefer to do it that other way if it's going to come out that way anyhow."

The "other way" appar-

ently is a reference to what was known in the White House as the policy of "limited hang out," a reference to making some facts about the scandal available through the Senate Watergate committee.

Nine days earlier, however, the Judiciary version of a Nixon-Dean conversation on March 13 shows, the President already had rejected what he called "the hang-out road."

"Well, what about the hang-out thing?" he asked Dean. ". . . Uh, is it too late to, to, frankly, go the hang-out road? Yes, it is." (In the White House version, the last phrase, "Yes, it is," is omitted.)

When Dean responded, "I think it is," the President in the Judiciary version said: "The hang-out road's going to have to be rejected. I, some, I understand it was rejected."

(The White House version omitted all but "the hang-out road.")

The transcripts released by the Judiciary Committee, while they filled in many of the unintelligible words in the White House version, still were not complete transcripts.

In a foreword to the report, Committee Chairman Peter W. Rodino Jr. (Dem-N.J.) said that he and ranking minority member Edward Hutchinson (Rep-Mich.) had eliminated "irrelevant material which was considered to be defamatory, degrading or embarrassing."

Rodino said the transcripts were "nearly the same" in both versions but the committee released a 131-page comparison of the conflicting passages.

The release of the transcripts by the committee

was sharply attacked by White House Press Secretary Ronald L. Ziegler as a "hyped P-R campaign" against President Nixon.

The version of the presidential conversations presented yesterday in the Judiciary Committee transcript suggests that Mr. Nixon knew far more about the Watergate coverup than is revealed in the White House transcripts. Almost every change in the White House-edited version seems to favor Mr. Nixon.

The highlights of the eight presidential conversations, and the differences between the Judiciary Committee and White House versions:

On Sept. 15, 1972, according to the committee version, the President, Haldeman and Dean discussed

possible action against Edward Bennett Williams, lawyer for The Washington Post, and against the Washington Post Company in its television stations' license renewal applications. This portion of the transcript was entirely omitted from the White House transcript previously reported in The Post.

In both the Judiciary and the White House versions of a Feb. 28, 1973, conversation the President asked Dean whether the Watergate defendants expected they would get clemency in "a reasonable time." In the White House version Dean did not respond. In the Judiciary version, Dean said, "I think they do . . ."

According to the Judiciary Committee version of the March 13 conversation, the President was told that a Haldeman aide, Gordon Strachan, not only knew of the Watergate incident but was going to testify to the contrary.

Dialogue between Mr. Nixon and Dean to the effect that Strachan knew about Watergate was in the White House version, but not included was this phrase: "Bob knew" — presumably Haldeman. In both versions, however, the President added that "he may not have."

Dean went on to say in both versions that Strachan "was judicious in what he relayed . . . but Strachan is as tough as nails."

Then, according to Judici-

ary's version only, the President asked: "What'll he say? Just go in and say he didn't know?"

Dean in the Judiciary version replied: "He'll go in and stonewall it and say, 'I don't know anything about what you are talking about.'" . . . In the White House version, it reads: "He can go in and stonewall," etc.

One of the key conversations occurred on the morning of March 21 when the

President and Dean, later joined by Haldeman, spoke of the growing dimensions of the Watergate scandal and conspirator E. Howard Hunt's, "blackmail" demands for \$120,000.

The Watergate Grand Jury has charged that this meeting was one of the overt acts in furtherance of the coverup conspiracy, and it is expected to be a key element in any impeachment charge made by the Judiciary Committee.

As with other conversations, the House version of the March 21 conversation shows Mr. Nixon knowing subtly more than in the White House transcript.

When Mr. Nixon says in the White House version that "Your major guy to keep under control is Hunt" he ends his statement with a question mark. The question mark is not present in the Judiciary version, where Dean replies (speaking about Hunt), "he knows so much."

Responds the President: "About a lot of things."

At another point the White House version has the President asking Dean about "the other probabilities." In the Judiciary version it is "the other vulnerabilities."

Still later, the President while referring to "the obstruction of justice thing" says "I think that one we can handle."

In the White House version of the same passage Mr. Nixon says: "I don't think on the obstruction of justice thing — I take that out."