

'They Had Been Betrayed and Deceived'

Gen. Alexander Haig Jr., the President's chief of staff, was personally shattered last Wednesday when he learned for the first time that the secret tape recording of June 23, 1972, was the "smoking gun" which would unequivocally incriminate Richard M. Nixon in the Watergate cover-up.

Haig was the first of many Nixon partisans to reel before the transcript of President Nixon's June 23 conversation with H. R. Haldeman. The tumultuous anger of the House Republican cloakroom late Monday was matched by silent despair inside the White House stemming from a common source: All had been betrayed and deceived by the President.

Republican congressmen were outraged that they had been led into Mr. Nixon's defense without being warned of incriminating transcripts yet to come. But late into the night Monday, some of the President's own aides sat at their desks trying to comprehend the betrayal.

What's more, careful reading of the June 23 transcript brought home the final deception: Even in admitting he had supplied "erroneous" information, the President's statement Monday attempted to gloss over how totally the transcript incriminated him.

According to sources in close contact

with the White House, the weekend decision at Camp David to release the transcript was a matter of necessity. It was calculated that its contents, supplied to the Special Prosecutor by Supreme Court order, would be public information within three weeks—just before the House impeachment vote. Accordingly it might be better to put out the information now rather than later.

In fact, the reaction could not have been worse. Mr. Nixon's admission that he had kept information from his own defenders produced pandemonium among House Republicans Monday afternoon and anguish from his 10 Republican defenders on the House Judiciary committee. Rep. Charles Sandman of New Jersey was steaming. Rep. Charles Wiggins of California was stunned. By Tuesday, all 10 had turned against the President.

One of the most important undecided Republicans, Rep. Barber Conable of New York, jumped off the fence. At midday Monday, Conable—chairman of the House Republican policy committee—was advising he would wait until the end of the impeachment debate before announcing his decision. But when he learned a few hours later of the betrayal of the 10 Judiciary Committee Republicans, he determined Mr. Nixon must go—a decision duplicated 24 hours

later by House Minority Leader John Rhodes.

Yet, that Republican outrage on the House floor was based only on the President's statement—in itself misleading and, therefore, another deception. Conable was angered that the President had failed to inform his defenders on the Judiciary Committee about the June 23 tape recording after reviewing it in May. The President's statement suggests that he had forgotten his attempt on June 23, 1972, to call off the FBI investigation of Watergate and had been reminded only in May 1974, when he reviewed the tape.

But the transcript itself, not yet available to most House members Monday afternoon, reveals much more: Less than a week after the Watergate break-in, Mr. Nixon was deeply involved in the cover-up and aware of all significant facts which did not become public until nearly a year later. That this knowledge could have been forgotten by the President defies credibility.

The June 23 conversations between the President and H. R. Haldeman put in focus the transcripts of March 1973. It is now clear Mr. Nixon's expressions of surprise when White House counsel John W. Dean III described to him the extent of the cover-up were a sham. What Dean revealed had been made

known to Mr. Nixon by Haldeman 10 months earlier.

That demolishes the White House line that Dean started the conspiracy. Yet, during the nationally televised debate, the 10 Nixon defenders were permitted to go through the fiction of describing Dean as the villain of Watergate who had betrayed his President.

When the scandal broke open in April 1973, the President persuaded Haig to leave the army and become his chief of staff after assurances that he was personally involved in no wrongdoing. Haig worked with the President on his now-repudiated statement of May 22, 1973, putting a national security blanket over Watergate, after being informed by Mr. Nixon that his memory was hazy about details.

When Haig finally learned the full truth a week ago, the President's resignation was discussed, then rejected. Uncomprehending Republican congressional leaders were informed Monday by Nixon defense lawyer James St. Clair that, on the contrary, the President feels what he has done is not sufficient grounds for impeachment and intends to tough it out. If so, he will fight with his once-intransigent hardcore of supporters destroyed irrevocably by the realization of two years of deception.