



'I didn't know it was loaded!'

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The Tapes That Sealed His Doom

It was only a slim volume in the encyclopedia of White House documents made public since April, but the 46 pages of Presidential transcripts released last week struck with epochal force. Buried in the text of three rambling conversations between Richard Nixon and H.R. (Bob) Haldeman on June 23, 1972, was the "smoking gun" that had eluded investigators during the 26 long months of the Watergate inquiry—proof positive, in the President's own words, that Nixon had personally ordered the Watergate cover-up only six days after the break-in at Democratic National Committee headquarters.

In direct, unequivocal language, the transcripts revealed that Nixon had told Haldeman to try to head off an FBI investigation that was getting perilously close to tracing the break-in to the Committee for the Re-election of the President. The new evidence shattered Nixon's repeated public declarations that he knew nothing of the cover-up until nearly a year after the break-in, and seemed to make a clear-cut case of Presidential obstruction of justice. It also brought to light new and damning details about the roles of Haldeman and CRP director John Mitchell in the cover-up. And in a Presidential statement accompanying the transcripts, Nixon was forced to admit that he had not only lied to the nation about the whole affair but had kept the truth from his own lawyers as well.

Quite apart from the evidence related to Nixon's legal culpability, the text of the June 23 conversations painted another brutally unflattering portrait of the

Presidential character. Even more than in the 1,254 pages of transcripts released by the White House three months ago, he spoke unself-consciously in his one-on-one talks with Haldeman. Over the pages his train of thought meandered from his selection of all-time baseball greats (Babe Ruth, Jackie Robinson and Sandy Koufax) to ugly generalizations about Jews and left-wingers in "the arts." He displayed a remarkable preoccupation with his past. And his words gave the lie to his oft-proclaimed non-involvement in politics during the summer of '72—depicting instead a man immersed in political minutiae ranging from TV camera angles to the problem of helicopter prop wash mussing his wife's hair.

'STAY TO HELL OUT OF THIS'

Clearly the biggest shocker in the transcripts was the disclosure of Mr. Nixon's key role in orchestrating the cover-up. From the beginning, he had publicly insisted that his only aim was to get the full Watergate story out. In October of 1972, he said he had not interfered with the FBI probe, declaring: "I wanted every lead carried out to the end because I wanted to be sure that no member of the White House staff and no man or woman in a position of major responsibility in the Committee for Re-election had anything to do with this kind of reprehensible activity."

The June 23 tape bluntly proved the President had lied. According to the transcript, Haldeman told Nixon that the FBI was on the verge of tracing Presidential campaign funds through a Mexi-

can bank to the Watergate burglars. And he suggested calling on the CIA to throw a national-security blanket on the Watergate investigation. "You know the Democratic break-in thing," he told Nixon, "we're back in the problem area because the FBI is not under control... the way to handle this now is to have [deputy CIA director Vernon] Walters call [acting FBI director L. Patrick] Gray and just say, 'Stay to hell out of this—this is, ah, business here we don't want you to go any further on it.'"

"What about Pat Gray?" the President responded. "You mean Pat Gray doesn't want to?"

"Pat does want to," said Haldeman. "He doesn't know how to, and he doesn't have any basis for doing it..."

Later, Haldeman asked Nixon about the FBI probe: "And you seem to think the thing to do is get them to stop?"

"Right, fine," the President replied.

The President's acquiescence seemed off-hand, almost uninterested. But moments later, he was counseling Haldeman to "play it tough. That's the way they play it and that's the way we are going to play it," and giving him specific instructions on how to get the CIA to cooperate with them. "When you get in [to the CIA] people," Nixon told his aide, "say, 'Look, the problem is that this will open the whole Bay of Pigs thing, and the President just feels that ah, without going into the details—don't, don't lie to them to the extent to say there is no involvement, but just say this is a comedy of errors... they should call the FBI in and (unintelligible) don't

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go any further into this case period!"*

In making public the June 23 transcripts, Nixon insisted that his earlier statements had been based on faulty "recollection." Yet the record shows that he continued the coverup for thirteen weeks after he reviewed the Haldeman tapes in early May of this year, and that he permitted his chief defense lawyer, James St. Clair, and GOP defenders on the House Judiciary Committee to continue to push the story that the President hadn't learned of the cover-up until his March 21, 1973, meeting with White House counsel John W. Dean III. "Although I recognized that these [tapes] presented potential problems," Nixon conceded in his statement last week, "I did not inform my staff or my counsel of it, or those arguing my case,

to cover up any aspects of the probe, the transcripts were damning. For Mitchell and Ehrlichman, the disclosures were almost as bad. At one point, Haldeman told the President that Mitchell was probably aware of the Watergate operation in advance. At another, the transcript suggested that Ehrlichman had a hand in planning the strategy for dealing with the CIA.

'NEGATIVE INFERENCES'

Much of the evidence against Ehrlichman and Mitchell was hearsay, but lawyers for all six defendants gloomily predicted that the release of the transcripts and the President's resignation would be strong "negative inferences" against their clients. As one put it: "Any juror with this fresh in his mind would think, by

in there of how politicians are like."

Of all the foibles displayed on the tapes, however, perhaps the most devastating was Nixon's apparent shrugging off of the real affairs of state. He preferred the shadow to the substance. When Haldeman tried to bring up the floating of the British pound, Nixon dismissed him abruptly: "It's too complicated for me to get into." And when Haldeman noted that Federal Reserve Board chairman Arthur Burns was concerned about the stability of the Italian lira, Nixon declared: "Well I don't give a (expletive deleted) about the lira . . . There ain't a vote in it." Even when foreign policy, the President's strong suit, came up, Nixon seemed concerned only with its appeal to the voters, urging Haldeman: "I just think you've got to hit that over and over again. We gotta win."

No political deal was too small for Nixon to worry about. When his wife complained that prop wash from the Presidential helicopter left her hair in disarray, the President discussed billeting Mrs. Nixon and daughters Tricia and Julie in Miami Beach for the Republican convention instead of at Key Biscayne—a short helicopter hop away. The Nixon wrath evident in earlier transcripts showed up again, too. This time the target was Herb Klein, Nixon communications director and long-time ally. Unhappy over Klein's handling of a meeting, in which the President was peppered with tough questions, Mr. Nixon said: "You've just not got to let Klein ever set up a meeting again. He just doesn't have his head screwed on."*

DIRECTING THE CAMPAIGN

The President coldly discussed the use of his family as political tools—but at the same time seemed hesitant to expose them to too much of the rough and tumble of campaigning. Recalling that Tricia had been troubled by some hostile demonstrators, he asked Haldeman: "What's your off-hand reaction on that Bob? I do not want them, though, to go in and get the hell kicked (unintelligible)." Throughout, he was in control of their schedules—and, although he later denied it, the entire campaign. Hearing that Julie had appeared at a Jacksonville, Fla., art museum, Nixon fumed: "Now the worst thing (unintelligible) is to go to anything that has to do with the arts . . . the arts, you know—they're Jews, they're left-wing—in other words, stay away . . . Middle America—put that word out . . ."

It was against that backdrop of banal rambling, of almost idle chitchat, that the fatal words were spoken. Casually, with eyes only for what was politically expedient, the President set in motion the Watergate cover-up—and unleashed the forces that would in time bring down his Administration.

*Klein's response: "I was surprised and hurt, but the fact is, our friendship goes back a long time. With most friends, there is a time when they make a comment which has no permanent meaning."

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P. What about Pat Gray--you mean Pat Gray doesn't want to?

H. Pat does want to. He doesn't know how to, and he doesn't have, he doesn't have any basis for doing it.

* * *

H. And you seem to think the thing to do is get them to stop?

P. Right, fine.

nor did I amend my submission to the Judiciary Committee . . . As a result, those arguing my case, as well as those passing judgment on the case, did so with information that was incomplete and in some respects erroneous."

The President was not the only one burned by the tapes. The new evidence seemed likely to prove equally damaging to the six men (Haldeman, Mitchell, White House aides John Ehrlichman and Gordon Strachan, and CRP staffers Kenneth W. Parkinson and Robert C. Mardian) already facing trial for the cover-up conspiracy. For Haldeman, who has insisted under oath that he never intended

logical inference: "The President resigns and concedes guilt, therefore anyone who worked for him is guilty."

Like the earlier transcripts, though, some of the most fascinating revelations were not about Watergate but about Richard Nixon the man. Throughout the conversations, he seemed to want to relive his past, focusing again and again on "Six Crises," the autobiographical account of his political career. He told Haldeman to reread the book and ordered it distributed to campaign staffers. "Actually, the book reads awfully well," he told his aide, later reminding him: "... that 'Six Crises' is a damned good book . . . reads like a novel—the Hiss case—Caracas was fascinating. The campaign of course for anybody in politics should be a must because it had a lot

*In the end, the CIA combed its records for evidence of covert operations that might have been jeopardized by the FBI investigation and, finding none, informed the White House there was nothing it could do to halt the probe.