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The Nixon Conspiracy

Even at this late date, the testimony provided to the Watergate trial last week by the Presidential tapes would simply not be believed had it been brought into court in any format other than Mr. Nixon's own words. It would be all but impossible to persuade a jury that those characters huddling over plans of how best to erase the traces of their crimes were actually the President of the United States and his closest advisers.

Consider this example: as the conspirators in the Oval Room suddenly suspected in April 1973 that John Dean might spill the beans, their only concern was how to destroy "that goddam Dean," as Mr. Nixon now called his former counsel. Not for one moment was the truth thought worth considering. The question was only whether Mr. Dean had, in his earlier incriminating conversations with Mr. Nixon, carried a concealed tape recorder and thus could be in a position to turn his master's tactics of duplicity against the master himself.

It seems like a bad dream that the man who was then occupying the White House agonized, in the manner of a Mafioso fearful of a defecting underling, about the possible ways in which Mr. Dean might have concealed a pocket recorder. Without such a recording, said Mr. Nixon, "it's his word against the President's," i.e., the President's lies would clearly prevail over a discredited defector's truth. Mr. Dean's testimony, of course, was ultimately corroborated not by clandestine tapes but by the President's own recordings.

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This tale of criminal plotting and intrigue shows how long Mr. Nixon had known of, and participated in, the cover-up. He was fully aware of the consequences of his actions. On April 23, 1973, John Ehrlichman warned Mr. Nixon that "if matters are not handled adroitly . . . you could get a resolution of impeachment." "That's right," answered Mr. Nixon. Mr. Ehrlichman added that such action might be taken "on the grounds that you committed a crime." Once again, Mr. Nixon agreed with a laconic "Right."

These disclosures provide new proof that Mr. Nixon's efforts to obstruct justice and deceive Congress continued unabated until the Supreme Court shattered the conspirators' stone wall by forcing Mr. Nixon to turn over the subpoenaed tapes. The fact that the most incriminating passages were blatantly omitted from those White House transcripts which Mr. Nixon presented with great flourish to Congress and the American people shows how the cover-up was intended to tough it out to the end—make it all, in Mr. Ehrlichman's words, "manageable."

After all, on April 25, 1973, Mr. Nixon told H.R. Haldeman: "There's still a hell of a lot of people out there . . . you know, they, they want to believe, that's the point, isn't it?"

Mr. Nixon missed the point then, just as he did again when, in response to the pardon extended to him by President Ford, he referred only to his "mistakes and misjudgments." The tapes suggest that if Mr. Nixon regretted any "mistakes and misjudgments" they were only those that brought the stone wall of lies and obstruction crashing down on his head and those of his indicted co-conspirators.