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Nixon lied about 'hush money,' new Watergate tape reveals

WASHINGTON (AP)—Former President Richard Nixon knew "hush money" was being sought to buy the silence of Watergate burglars at least two months before he admitted learning of a coverup operation, the Washington Post reported today.

Citing heretofore unpublished transcripts of White House tapes, the Post also said Nixon was aware of the demand for "hush money" in January 1973, a week before the first news stories broke about support payments to Watergate burglars.

The New York Times, meanwhile, reported that Nixon was "intensely involved in the Watergate coverup beginning as early as three days after the June 17, 1972, break-in."

Nixon has maintained, and no previous tapes have contradicted, that he first learned of the requests for "hush money" from White House counsel John Dean at a March 21, 1973, meeting in the Oval Office.

The March meeting became the focal point of Nixon's refutation of charges that he was aware of the coverup earlier than March 21.

Yet, 2½ months earlier in a meeting with special counsel and intimate Charles Colson, the Post said, the new-found transcripts quoted Nixon as saying:

"God damn hush money, uh, how are we going to (unintelligible) how do we get this stuff . . ."

The first Watergate trial began that March day.

The "hush money" reference is the first such reference in the available White House transcripts, which eventually forced Nixon to resign in August 1974.

This and other transcripts showed that Nixon knew these payments were central to the coverup and, if publicized, would worsen his position considerably, the Post said.

The Times said it had obtained transcripts of tapes never released before "in the wake of widespread speculation that Mr. Nixon had refused, for the most part, to concede culpability in the Watergate affair in interviews with David Frost that are to be televised nationally beginning Wednesday night."

The Times' tapes disclosed that Nixon discussed the break-in on June 20, 1972, with Charles Colson, then a White House counsel. He said to Colson, "We are just going to leave this where it is, with the Cubans." The reference was to the former Cuban exiles arrested in the Watergate complex.

The Times report also says in April 1973, Nixon was so preoccupied with Watergate that he spent days trying to figure out ways to extricate himself.

Special Watergate prosecutor Charles Ruff said last night that the transcripts referred to by the Post were not supplied by his office. Ruff said, however, he had heard there were "three or four floating around."

Nixon, who has never admitted criminal misconduct, will tell his side of the story beginning this week in a series of television interviews with British personality David Frost. The interviews were recorded recently in California.