

5-9-77
Newsweek

'ONE JUMP AHEAD OF THE SHERIFF'

David Frost may have caught Richard Nixon by surprise several times during their interviews by confronting the fallen President with new details of the Watergate cover-up. Frost's source was White House tapes obtained—but never made public—by the Watergate special prosecutor and House Judiciary Committee. NEWSWEEK obtained transcripts of some of these tapes last week. They contained no startling new evidence. But they offered a vivid picture of a President in distress, a man who knew almost from the first how deeply his Administration was involved in the burglary and cover-up. Some highlights:

Three days after the Watergate break-in, Nixon summoned his loyal counselor Charles Colson to the Oval Office to discuss the affair. Officially, press secretary Ronald Ziegler had dismissed it as a "second-rate burglary," and had said the White House knew nothing about it. The new tapes show that the President knew a good deal.

NIXON: "It doesn't sound like a skillful job (unintelligible). If we didn't know better, we would have thought it was deliberately botched."

Nixon said he didn't learn the true extent of the White House involvement until March 21, 1973, when John Dean warned him of a "cancer within, close to the Presidency." The tapes offer a different calendar. In a Jan. 8, 1973, conversation with Colson, Nixon said, "God-dam hush money, uh, how do we get this stuff?" He was referring to money to keep the Watergate burglars silent. On Feb. 13, 1973, Nixon told Colson that "[Attorney General John] Mitchell seems to have stonewalled it up to this point." On Feb. 14, according to the tapes, Nixon issued marching orders.

NIXON: "My losses are to be cut. The President's losses got to be cut on the cover-up deal . . . My situation here is

extremely good. I never talked to . . . I divorced myself from the tactics of the campaign."

The circle began to tighten when Dean started to talk to Federal prosecutors in early April 1973. On April 25, the tapes show, the President got a warning from John Ehrlichman, his chief domestic adviser:

EHRlichman: "I think it's entirely conceivable that if Dean is totally out of control and if matters are not handled

(unintelligible) that you could get a resolution of impeachment in the Senate.

NIXON: "That's right."

EHRlichman: "... And I think the only way that I know to make a judgment on this is for you to listen to your tapes and see what was actually said . . . or maybe for Bob [White House chief of staff H.R. (Bob) Haldeman] to do it, or somebody—to see what was what."

Nixon, according to the tapes, summoned Haldeman and said: "I don't think it should get out that we taped this office."

He said he would only admit to taping "national-security stuff"—and would deny taping anything else. He added that he hoped only "trustworthy" aides knew about his tape system. After listening to some tapes, Haldeman joked bleakly that the microphones had picked up Dean more clearly than Nixon.

On April 26, four days before Nixon fired Haldeman and Ehrlichman, he summoned a desperate, close-the-ranks crisis meeting with Haldeman, Ehrlichman, Ziegler and White House aide Stephen Bull on the unraveling cover-up.

NIXON: "It's like our Vietnam withdrawal . . . We kept one jump ahead of the f---ing sheriff . . . Now in this case that's what we're doing . . . I know who the target is, Bob. I know this isn't going to satisfy them. I know they hate my guts and they're always gonna hate my guts."

Then he turned to his palace guardsmen and said he thought he had one ace in the hole.

NIXON: "Do you think the people of the United States are gonna impeach a President because of John Dean?"

—TOM MATHEWS with NICHOLAS HORROCK



Tony Rollo—Newsweek

Colson: His marching orders were to cut the losses