

Watergate: Taped White House Conversations (1972)

Watergate, a “third-rate burglary attempt” that became a national crisis, ultimately forced Richard Nixon to resign the presidency to avoid certain impeachment and conviction (and possible criminal charges.) It also resulted in criminal convictions of several of the president’s advisors and in the enactment of a number of reforms.

Secretly taped White House conversations between President Nixon and various associates proved to be central to the exposure of Watergate. Two important conversations are excerpted here – the first involving H.R. Haldeman, the president’s chief of staff, the second John Dean, White House counsel. Among those referred to but not fully identified in the following passages are John Mitchell, a former attorney general who headed the Committee to Re-Elect the President; Maurice Stans, finance chair of the committee; John Ehrlichman, domestic affairs assistant to the president; and E. Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy, former operatives of the Central Intelligence Agency, who were security consultants to the Nixon White House.

Sources: Excerpt from White House transcripts of conversations between H.R. Haldeman and Richard Nixon in the Oval Office of the President, June 23, 1972; and between John Dean and Richard Nixon, September 15, 1972. U.S. Congress, House. National Archives. Permission is granted for electronic copying, distribution in print form for educational purposes and personal use.

TRANSCRIPT OF A RECORDING OF A MEETING BETWEEN THE PRESIDENT AND H.R. HALDEMAN IN THE OVAL OFFICE ON JUNE 23, 1972 FROM 10:04 TO 11:39 AM

Haldeman: ... Now, on the investigation, you know, the Democratic break-in thing, we’re back to the-in the, the problem area because the FBI is not under control, because [Director Patrick] Gray doesn’t exactly know how to control them, and they have, their investigation is now leading into some productive areas, because they’ve been able to trace the money, not through the money itself, but through the bank, you know, sources – the banker himself. And, and it goes in some directions we don’t want it to go. Ah, also there have been some things, like an informant came in off the street to the FBI in Miami, who was a photographer or has a friend who is a photographer who developed some films through this guy, [Bernard] Barker, and the films had pictures of Democratic National Committee letter head documents and things. So I guess, so it’s things like that that are gonna, that are filtering in. [John] Mitchell came up with yesterday, and John Dean analyzed very carefully last night and concludes, concurs now with Mitchell’s recommendation that the only way to solve this, and we’re set up beautifully to do it, ah, in that and that...the only network that paid any attention to it last night was NBC...they did a massive story on the Cuban...

Nixon: That’s right.

Haldeman: thing.

Nixon: Right.

Haldeman: That the way to handle this now is for us to have Walters call Pat Gray and just say, “Stay the hell out of this...this is ah, business here we don’t want you to go any further on it.” That’s not an unusual development, ...

Nixon: Um huh.

Haldeman: ...and, uh, that would take care of it.

Nixon: What about Pat Gray, ah, you mean he doesn’t want to?

Haldeman: Pat does want to. He doesn’t know how to, and he doesn’t have, he doesn’t have any basis for doing it. Given this, he will then have the basis. He’ll call Mark Felt in, and the two of them ...and Mark Felt wants to cooperate because...

Nixon: Yeah.

Haldeman: he’s ambitious...

Nixon: Yeah.

Haldeman: Ah, he’ll call him in and say, “We’ve got the signal from across the river to, to put the hold on this.” And that will fit rather well because the FBI agents who are working the case, at this point, feel that’s what it is. This is CIA.

Nixon: But they’ve traced the money to ‘em.

Haldeman: Well they have, they’ve traced to a name, but they haven’t gotten to the guy yet.

Nixon: Would it be somebody here?

Haldeman: Ken Dahlberg.

Nixon: Who the hell is Ken Dahlberg?

Haldeman: He’s ah, he gave \$25,000 in Minnesota and ah, the check went directly in to this, to this guy Barker.

Nixon: Maybe he’s a ...bum.

Nixon: He didn’t get this from the committee though, from Stans.

Haldeman: Yeah. It is. It is. It’s directly traceable and there’s some more through some Texas people in-that went to the Mexican bank which they can also trace to the Mexican bank...they’ll get their names today. And (pause)

Nixon: Well, I mean, ah, there’s no way... I’m just thinking if they don’t cooperate, what do they say? They, they were approached by the Cubans. That’s what Dahlberg has to say, the Texans too. Is that the idea?

Haldeman: Well, if they will. But then we’re relying on more and more people all the time. That’s the problem. And ah, they’ll stop if we could, if we take this other step.

Nixon: All right. Fine.

Haldeman: And, and they seem to feel the thing to do is get them to stop?

Nixon: Right, fine.

Haldeman: They say the only way to do that is from White House instructions. And it’s got to be to Helms and, ah, what’s his name...? Walters.

Nixon: Walters.

Haldeman: And the proposal would be that Ehrlichman (coughs) and I call them in

Nixon: All right, fine.

Haldeman: and say, ah...

Nixon: How do you call him in, I mean you just, well, we protected Helms from one hell of a lot of things.

Haldeman: That’s what Ehrlichman says.

Nixon: Of course, this is a, this is a Hunt, you will-that will uncover a lot of things. You open that scab there’s a hell of a lot of things and that we just feel that it would be very detrimental to have this thing go any further. This involves these Cubans, Hunt, and a lot of hanky-panky that we have nothing to do with ourselves. Well what the hell, did Mitchell know about this thing to any much of a degree.

Haldeman: I think so. I don’t think he knew the details, but I think he knew.

Nixon: He didn’t know how it was going to be handled though, with Dahlberg and the Texans and so forth? Well who was the asshole that did? (Unintelligible) Is it Liddy? Is that the fellow? He must be a little nuts.

Haldeman: He is.

Nixon: I mean he just isn't well screwed on, is he? Isn't that the problem?

Haldeman: No, but he was under pressure, apparently, to get more information, and as he got more pressure, he pushed the people harder to move harder on...

Nixon: Pressure from Mitchell?

Haldeman: Apparently.

Nixon: Oh, Mitchell, Mitchell was at the point that you made on this, that exactly what I need from you is on the-

Haldeman: Gemstone, yeah.

Nixon: All right, fine, I understand it all. We won't second-guess Mitchell and the rest. Thank God it wasn't Colson.

Haldeman: The FBI interviewed Colson yesterday. They determined that would be a good thing to do.

Nixon: Um hum.

Haldeman: Ah, to have him take a...

Nixon: Um hum.

Haldeman: An interrogation, which he did, and that, the FBI guys working the case had concluded that there were one or two possibilities, one, that this was a White House, they don't think that there is anything at the Election Committee, they think it was either a White House operation and they had some obscure reasons for it, non-political, ...

Nixon: Uh huh.

Haldeman: or it was a...

Nixon: Cuban thing-

Haldeman: Cubans and the CIA. And after their interrogation of, of...

Nixon: Colson.

Haldeman: Colson, yesterday, they concluded it was not the White House, but are now convinced it is a CIA thing, so the CIA turn off would...

Nixon: Well, not sure of their analysis, I'm not going to get that involved. I'm (unintelligible).

Haldeman: No, sir. We don't want you to.

Nixon: You call them in.

Nixon: Good. Good deal! Play it tough. That's the way they play it and that's the way we are going to play it.

Haldeman: O.K. We'll do it.

Nixon: Yeah, when I saw that news summary item, I of course knew it was a bunch of crap, but I thought ah, well it's good to have them off on this wild hair thing because when they start bugging us, which they have, we'll know our little boys will not know how to handle it. I hope they will though. You never know. Maybe, you think about it. Good!

Nixon: When you get in these people when you...get these people in, say: "Look, the problem is that this will open the whole, 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 sort of a comedy of errors, bizarre, without

getting into it, "the President believes that it is going to open the whole Bay of Pigs thing up again. And, ah because these people are plugging for, for keeps and that they should call the FBI in and say that we wish for the country, don't go any further into this case", period!

Haldeman: OK.

Nixon: That's the way to put it, do it straight (Unintelligible)

Haldeman: Get more done for our cause by the opposition than by us at this point.

Nixon: You think so?

Haldeman: I think so, yeah.

TRANSCRIPT OF A RECORDING OF A MEETING BETWEEN
THE PRESIDENT AND JOHN DEAN IN THE OVAL OFFICE
ON SEPTEMBER 15, 1972 FROM 5:27 TO 6:17 PM

Nixon: They're all in it together.

Dean: That's right.

Nixon: They should just, uh, just behave and, and, recognize this, this is, again, this is war. We're getting a few shots and it'll be over, and we'll give them a few shots and it'll be over. Don't worry. I wouldn't want to be on the other side right now. Would you? I wouldn't want to be in Edward Bennet Williams', Williams' position after this election.

...

Dean: Well, that's, uh, along that line, uh, one of the things I've tried to do, is just keep notes on a lot of the people who are emerging as...as less than our friends... Because this is going to be over some day and they're -- We shouldn't forget the way that some of them (unintelligible)

Nixon: I want the most, I want the most comprehensive notes on all of those that have tried to do us in. Because they didn't have to do it... They didn't have to do it. I mean, if the thing had been a clo -- uh, they had a very close election everybody on the other side would understand this game. But now they are doing this quite deliberately and they are asking for it and they are going to get it. And this, this -- We, we have not used the power in this first four years, as you know... We have never used it. We haven't used the Bureau and we haven't used the Justice Department, but things are going to change now. And they're going to change, and, and they're going to get it right --

Dean: That's an exciting prospect.

Nixon: It's got to be done. It's the only thing to do... Oh, oh, well, we've just been, we've been just God damn fools. For us to come into this election campaign and not do anything with regard to the Democratic Senators who are running, and so forth. They're, they're crooks, they've been stealing, they've been taking (unintelligible). That's ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous. It's not going, going to be that way any more...

Questions:

1. According to these transcripts, how much did President Nixon know about the financial and security operations of his reelection campaign?
2. According to these transcripts, what did Nixon know on June 23, 1972, about the Watergate break-in and related matters? What evidence do the transcripts provide that Nixon ordered the CIA and the FBI to participate in the cover-up?
3. Do the transcripts reveal other matters Nixon might not have wished to have made public or that might have affected public respect for government? Explain.
4. What was the Watergate scandal fundamentally about?