

Date: March 21, 1973

Time: 10:12 –11:55

Participants: Richard M. Nixon, John W. Dean III

Location: Oval Office

Tape: 886-008

SCROLLER TITLE: “A Cancer within . . . the Presidency”

SCENE SETTER: Aware that two of President Nixon’s closest aides—Chief of Staff H. R. “Bob” Haldeman and Chief Domestic Adviser John D. Ehrlichman—might be charged with obstruction of justice, White House counsel John W. Dean III, himself at risk of obstruction charges, briefed the President on the growing threat to his administration.

John W. Dean III: The reason I thought we ought to talk this morning is because, in our conversations, I have the impression that you don’t know everything I know, [*President Nixon acknowledges*] and it makes it very difficult for you to make judgments that only you can make—

President Nixon: That’s right.

Dean: —on some of these things. And I thought that you—

President Nixon: [*Unclear*] in other words, I’ve got to know why you’d feel that our [*unclear*] something [*unclear*]

Dean: Well, let me—

President Nixon: —that we shouldn’t unravel something.

Dean: Let me give you my overall, first.

President Nixon: In other words, your judgment as to where it stands and where we ought to go.

Dean: I think that there’s no doubt about the seriousness of the problem we’ve got. We have a cancer within—close to the presidency, that’s growing. It’s growing daily. It’s compounding. It grows geometrically now, [*President Nixon acknowledges throughout*] because it compounds itself.

That’ll be clear as I explain, you know, some of the details of why it is, and it basically is because (1) we’re being blackmailed, (2) people are going to start perjuring themselves very quickly that have not had to perjure themselves to protect other people, and the like. And that is just—and there’s no assurance—

President Nixon: That it won’t bust.

Dean: That that won’t bust.

President Nixon: That’s true.

Dean: So let me give you the sort of basic facts, talking first about the Watergate, and then about [Donald H.] Segretti, and about some of the peripheral items that have come up. First of all, on the Watergate: How did it all start? Where did it start?

It started with an instruction to me from [H. R.] Bob Haldeman to see if we couldn’t set up a perfectly legitimate campaign intelligence operation over at the re-election committee [Committee to Re-Elect the President (CREEP)]. [*President Nixon acknowledges throughout.*]

Not being in this business, I turned to somebody who had been in this business, [John J.] Jack Caulfield, who is—I don't know if you remember Jack or not. He was your original bodyguard before they had candidate protection, an old New York City policeman.

President Nixon: Right. I know him. I know him.

Dean: [Clears throat.] Jack had worked for John [D. Ehrlichman] and then was transferred to my office. And I said, "Jack, come up with a plan that, you know, is a normal infiltration. I mean, you know, buying information from secretaries, and all that sort of thing."

He did. He put together a plan. It was kicked around, and I went to Ehrlichman with it, I went to [John N.] Mitchell with it, and the consensus was that Caulfield wasn't the man to do this. In retrospect, that might have been a bad call, 'cause he is an incredibly cautious person and wouldn't have put the situation to where it is today.

President Nixon: Yeah.

Dean: Right after rejecting that, they said, "We still need something." So I was told to look around for somebody that could go over to 1701 [Pennsylvania Avenue, CREEP headquarters] and do this. And that's when I came up with [G.] Gordon Liddy, who—they needed a lawyer.

Gordon had an intelligence background from his FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] service. I was aware of the fact that he had done some extremely sensitive things for the White House [Plumbers unit] while he'd been at the White House, and he apparently [had] done them well, going out into [Daniel J.] Ellsberg's doctor's office—

President Nixon: Oh, yeah.

Dean: —and things like this. He'd worked with leaks. He, you know, tracked these things down. And [clears throat] so the report that I got from [Egil "Bud"] Krogh [Jr.] was that he was a hell of a good man, and not only that, a good lawyer, and could set up a proper operation.

So we talked to Liddy. Liddy was interested in doing it. [I] took Liddy over to meet Mitchell. Mitchell thought highly of him, because apparently Mitchell was partly involved in his coming to the White House to work for Krogh. Liddy had been at [Department of the] Treasury before that.

Then Liddy was told to put together his plan. You know, how he would run an intelligence operation. And this was after he was hired over there at the Committee. [Jeb Stuart] Magruder called me in January and said, "I'd like to have you come over and see Liddy's plan."

President Nixon: January of '72?

Dean: January of '72. "I'd like you to come over to Mitchell's office and sit in on a meeting where Liddy is going to lay his plan out." I said, "Well, I don't really know as I'm the man, but if you want me there I'll be happy to." [Clears throat.] So I came over, and Liddy laid out a million-dollar plan that was the most incredible thing I have ever laid my eyes on: all in codes, and involved black bag operations, kidnapping, providing prostitutes to weaken the opposition, bugging, mugging teams. It was just an incredible thing. [Clears throat.]

President Nixon: [Unclear.]

End of excerpt.

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