

55 of 58 DOCUMENTS

NBC News Transcripts

June 15, 1997, Sunday 10:40 AM

SHOW: MEET THE PRESS (10:00 AM ET)

BEN BRADLEE, JOHN DEAN III AND HOWARD BAKER DISCUSS THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE WATERGATE BREAK-IN

LENGTH: 2359 words

MR. RUSSERT: June 17, 1972, five men break into Democratic Party offices. Ben **Bradlee**, when you heard the news of that break-in, how long before you knew this was one big story?

MR. **BRADLEE**: Oh, when they were arraigned and when one of them, Bocker, said that he worked for the CIA, and then a few hours later, when somebody reported that in the little memo book of one of the burglars was an address, it was the telephone number of the White House.

MR. RUSSERT: John Dean, you were then counsel in the White House to President Nixon. When you heard of the break-in, what was your first reaction?

MR. DEAN: Well, I landed in San Francisco on Sunday the 18, and called my office. I had been giving a graduation address in Manila, and after being out of the office for about five days, I thought I ought to check in. Jet-lagged, I thought I'd spend a day in San Francisco, got my aide on the phone and he said, "John, there's been a break-in at the DNC," didn't tell me much on the phone, but he said, "I think you better get back because this may be a problem."

MR. RUSSERT: Did President Nixon know of the break-in before it occurred?

MR. DEAN: I have never seen a scintilla of evidence that he did. If you asked me did he know if there was somebody with maybe that mentality or that those sort of things had been thought about and planned, I'd say I have seen some evidence. But as to the break-in itself, I don't think anybody at the White House knew about it.

MR. RUSSERT: There's a book out, "Silent Coup," which says that you masterminded the break-in at the Democratic Party headquarters, not President Nixon.

MR. DEAN: The book is a bad joke, and I decided rather than to let it--it goes further than that, and because it so defamatory, I decided to bring a lawsuit and, indeed, have done just that.

MR. RUSSERT: Senator Baker, you seem to suggest that the Democrats, Larry O'Brien, in particular, who was then chairman of the Democratic Party, knew about the break-in or had some evidence that they were at least under surveillance.

MR. BAKER: Well, maybe. I don't know that Larry O'Brien knew there was going to be a break-in. There's ample record evidence, though, that he was told of McCord's effort to buy all this wiretap stuff ahead of time. Now, whether that translates into fair notice that something is going to happen, you know, there's an open question. But I'm not prepared to say that O'Brien knew in advance that it happened, but there was certainly a lot going on, a lot of dust up in the air before it happened.

Let me answer the question you gave to Ben **Bradlee** here, about, "When did you first figure out something was going on?" I honestly thought this whole thing was a bad Democratic ploy to embarrass Richard Nixon. And it wasn't until much later, after I'd been appointed to that committee, that it began to appear to me, "There's more to this than you know and you better find out what's going on."

MR. RUSSERT: John Dean, bad Democratic ploy? You had some sense that things like this were being planned, right?

MR. DEAN: Oh, indeed, I did. I had a rather intense baptism when I went into the White House in July of 1970. One of the first things that was given me was a plan that's been dubbed the Houston Plan, that was going to remove all restraints on intelligence gathering. And it was fairly shocking. I went to Attorney General John Mitchell and said, "General, I really think this is a little bit more than is called for." And he said, "I agree." J. Edgar Hoover had dug his heels in and said he didn't want his agency to have any part of it. So

John Mitchell and I agreed that what would be done would be something that needed to be done, is that the intelligence agencies who were not talking to each other would have a coordinating body with which they could talk. That's as far as it went.

MR. RUSSERT: Do you believe John Mitchell knew about the plan for the break-in?

MR. DEAN: I don't know. Yeah, I knew he approved it. Very late in the game, he told me on March 29 or March 28 of 1973, in a meeting in Dwight Chapin's office when Mr. Chapin wasn't there, he conceded to me that he had approved the plan for Liddy to go forward.

MR. RUSSERT: And if Mitchell knew, could you not assume that Nixon knew?

MR. DEAN: Not necessarily. The White House was highly compartmentalized. John Ehrlichman recently wrote a piece about listening to some of the new tapes that are out. And he said he was surprised to hear some of the things on those tapes that he didn't know about.

MR. RUSSERT: Ben **Bradlee**, when did you know that, "My God, this story may mean the end of the Nixon presidency"?

MR. **BRADLEE**: Well, I disagree with my colleague. Carl Bernstein I heard the other day say that he and Woodward knew early on. I don't believe that. I certainly didn't. We were also working very hard not to arrive in any public way at that conclusion. The word impeachment was barred from the newsroom for a long time. We did not want to be seen to be gloating, seem to be jumping to conclusions, seem to be doing anything.

MR. RUSSERT: Senator Baker, let me ask you the question that you became famous for. What did the president know and when did he know it?

MR. BAKER: Well, that is still the key question. And I don't guess we'll ever know now that President Nixon is dead and John Mitchell's dead and the like. But I came to ask that question early on in the hearings when it seemed to me the hearings were drifting and they had no focus. And I said to my then-press secretary, Ron Mackman, "We ought to find out some way to focus this thing," and that's the question I put. He didn't think it was a very good idea at the time and I've never let him forget it.

MR. DEAN: It was a good question at the time.

MR. RUSSERT: Senator Baker, you also have said that The Washington Post winning a Pulitzer Prize for this kind of story was the worst thing to happen to our political process. What were you trying to say?

MR. BAKER: Well, first of all, let me deny it.

MR. RUSSERT: We'll roll the tape, Senator.

MR. BAKER: Yeah, no. But just for record purposes, I guess I ought to do that. I do sort of remember that and I don't remember the context it was said in. But whatever the context was, it was a mistake. It is true that **Watergate** coverage turned all young reporters into Woodward and Bernsteins or their ambition was to do investigative work. It is not true that The Post missed, disserved the country, because they did a magnificent job under terrible circumstances. And not only did they do a good job, but the country did a good job and the system did a good job, and it worked and we're here and the system's functioning. So when you take it all together--even though it was a terrible experience for some of us and for the country as a whole, taken all together, it is amazing that it worked so well.

MR. RUSSERT: Did we create a whole generation of Woodward and Bernsteins? Is that a good or bad thing?

MR. **BRADLEE**: No, I think that's a slight exaggeration. I think that a great many journalists of highest quality were attracted into the business just as a great many politicians of the highest quality were attracted into the business. Some of them had delusions of grandeur and thought that there was a shortcut and that you could cover a fire and find out that the fire chief was anti-Semitic and there was gasoline in the hose and you could get on page one pretty fast.

MR. RUSSERT: Ben **Bradlee**, was...

MR. **BRADLEE**: That's what editors are for.

MR. RUSSERT: ...there any sense at The Washington Post that this was a good chance to get Nixon?

MR. **BRADLEE**: No. You know, one of--the question was whether Nixon was going to be gotten, and it must be remembered that Nixon got Nixon. The Post didn't get Nixon. One of the things we used to say, "God, if Nixon had only been a Democrat," then we would have ducked this whole thing of, you know, "You SOB's only going after Republicans."

MR. RUSSERT: John Dean, why didn't President Nixon burn the tapes, and would he have had to resigned if he had, in fact, burned the tapes?

MR. DEAN: Well, I think he probably would have survived had the tapes not surfaced. Why he didn't? I wasn't there at that time. As you may recall, it was my inclination that I had been taped that provoked the question that would be asked that revealed the tapes. History would have been different had he destroyed the tapes. The tapes are still talking.

MR. RUSSERT: Senator Baker, if Nixon had destroyed the tapes, could he have survived?

MR. BAKER: I don't know whether he could or not, but said a moment ago that the most remarkable thing is that our system worked and we're a vigorous democracy still. And we overlooked the fact that President Nixon, notwithstanding all of his faults, also was part of that system and that worked, too. He did not destroy the tapes. And I think it's remarkable that he didn't. I don't know why he didn't. Maybe there's another copy of them someplace, but he didn't do it, and to do it would have been clear obstruction of justice and a violation of his oath. So he didn't do it and that's another part of the success story.

MR. RUSSERT: Senator, do you believe that before Richard Nixon resigned, he had a promise of a pardon?

MR. BAKER: No. No. And I've had an opportunity to talk to President Ford about that and to others. And I'm convinced he did not. I think there was a conversation about that. There may have been differing views of what that conversation meant, but I'm positive that President Jerry Ford did not promise him a pardon.

MR. RUSSERT: No conversation of **Watergate** is complete without a discussion of Deep Throat. John Dean, in your book, you said it was Alexander Haig.

MR. DEAN: I, at one point, thought that would be the case.

MR. RUSSERT: Mr. Woodward and Mr. Bernstein have said it is not Alexander Haig.

MR. DEAN: Right.

MR. RUSSERT: Do you have a second guess?

MR. DEAN: Well, The Washington Post--I think it was for the 20th anniversary--had Walter Pincus take a very hard look and he came down, after sifting through all of this, with what, to me, was kind of an interesting and persuasive thing. He said, that the garage that was in the film, Bob Woodward had told him, looked so much like the garage that he met his source. And so Walter Pincus went around and looked at garages. And the garage he found that looked and fit other criteria was Pat Gray's garage. And I don't know if Pat Gray...

MR. RUSSERT: Acting director of the FBI.

MR. DEAN: Acting director of the FBI, yes.

MR. RUSSERT: Ben **Bradlee**, while Woodward and Bernstein were working their source, particularly Deep Throat, you didn't know who it was until when?

MR. **BRADLEE**: I didn't know until well after Nixon left. I knew where Deep Throat worked, and who his associates were.

MR. RUSSERT: When did you find--who told you who Deep Throat was?

MR. **BRADLEE**: There was--right after--some time after, maybe the year after **Watergate**, there seemed to be a gathering of a storm about, you know, did Deep Throat really exist and was he a composite and I took Woodward for a walk in McPherson Square, and I said, "It's time that..."

MR. RUSSERT: That's your editor.

MR. **BRADLEE**: "...I know the name"--and he gave it to me.

MR. RUSSERT: Have you ever told anyone?

MR. **BRADLEE**: I've never told a soul.

MR. RUSSERT: Your wife?

MR. **BRADLEE**: No. Of course not.

MR. RUSSERT: Will you ever?

MR. **BRADLEE**: No, I don't think I will. They're going to.

MR. RUSSERT: When will the world know who Deep Throat is?

MR. **BRADLEE**: When Deep Throat dies. That's what Woodward and Bernstein know. That's what they say.

MR. RUSSERT: Senator Baker, who do you think Deep Throat is?

MR. BAKER: I have no idea who Deep Throat is, but I really wish that were not the case. If there is a single person who is Deep Throat, it's a shame to wait till he dies and can't speak in order to talk to him. But that's...

MR. **BRADLEE**: Well, he can release us from our obligation to not identify him any time he wants.

MR. BAKER: Well, that's sort of what I'm suggesting, you know, that he ought to do that so we can find out.

MR. **BRADLEE**: You're speaking to him?

MR. BAKER: Certainly to you, and maybe he's listening.

MR. RUSSERT: Ben, could I--would you write a number down here for me so I...

MR. **BRADLEE**: Yes.

MR. RUSSERT: Can you give us any guidance whatsoever?

MR. **BRADLEE**: None.

MR. RUSSERT: None? Male, female? Big, tall? You said...

MR. **BRADLEE**: He's been identified as a male, I think, a living male.

MR. RUSSERT: You said if you...

MR. DEAN: Bob Woodward's told me that his name has surfaced and he has denied it.

MR. RUSSERT: Is that true?

MR. **BRADLEE**: I don't know.

MR. RUSSERT: You said if you took all the facts written by Woodward and Bernstein...

MR. **BRADLEE**: I once said that.

MR. RUSSERT: ...and put them in a computer, you could figure this out.

MR. **BRADLEE**: Well, this is when I had more respect for computers than I do now.

MR. RUSSERT: Senator Baker, before we go, you also mentioned that after **Watergate**, the country turned more cynical towards their government, towards their political leaders. Is that still the case? Have we ever recovered?

MR. BAKER: No, I think we've recovered to some degree. But it is also a very corrosive effect and has been for a long time. And my great concern about **Watergate**, other than the obvious fact that we went through a great political trauma, is that the example of **Watergate** and the cynicism that followed may turn off young men and women who ought to be in government, who ought to be aspiring to public office, either appointive or elective. I think we're recovering from that. But I think we've still got a problem there, because we've burdened public service with so many disclosures, so many regulations that it's getting tough to get the right people to run.

MR. RUSSERT: John Dean, the lasting lesson--legacy--of **Watergate**?

MR. DEAN: Don't hire Gordon Liddy.

MR. RUSSERT: That has to be the last word.

MR. BAKER: Can I say one?

MR. RUSSERT: Sure.

MR. BAKER: Cover-ups never work.

MR. DEAN: Right.

MR. RUSSERT: Is that a message to President Clinton?

MR. BAKER: No, that's just a fact.

MR. RUSSERT: Cover-ups never work. And Ben **Bradlee**?

MR. **BRADLEE**: **Follow the money.**

MR. RUSSERT: No. No. Ben? Ben? Come on, tell me. Come on, tell me.

I'm going to take a break and **Bradlee's** going to cough it up, I promise. We'll be right back after this.

(Announcements)

LOAD-DATE: June 24, 1997

LANGUAGE: English

TYPE: Interview

Copyright 1997 National Broadcasting Co. Inc.