

'To Tell The Truth. . .'

"Tell the truth. That's the thing I have told everybody around here — tell the truth!" — President Nixon, from the transcript.

By NEA - London Economist News Service

To remove a president of the United States does not lie in the power of the American people: the Constitution entrusted it to Congress, empowering the House of Representatives to bring an impeachment and the Senate to pronounce on it.

Nevertheless, President Nixon answered one of the congressional demands for impeachment information by taking his case to the people. To be sure, he gave the judiciary committee of the House of Representatives a vast quantity of information, incomplete but voluminous transcripts of his taped private conversations with his advisers about the Watergate affair.

But he made the whole business public, and he presented it in a television address that echoed, no doubt consciously, the speech that made his cocker spaniel, Checkers, the most famous American dog and saved his political career more than 20 years ago.

"It isn't easy," said Mr. Nixon in 1952, "to come before a nationwide audience and bare your life, as I have done."

Now he has done it again, conceding that the transcripts would "become the grist for many sensational stories in the press," that they would be embarrassing, "the subject of speculation and even ridicule" — in short, "never before in the history of the presidency have records that have been so private been made so public."

Well, then, why did he do it, when all he had been required to do was to send some tapes along to a congressional committee in a briefcase? The impeachment proceeding is peculiar and follows its own rules, but, even so. Congressman and senators have to respond to the feelings of their voters. By his act of publicly disrobing, the President must have intended to make Congress nervous of a possible public revulsion if it were seen to harry



him too far.

He did it well: here, after a year of floundering and false notes, was a strong, skillful politician at work. The speech was carefully constructed and economically written, its delivery grave and calm. Even the panning of the camera to show the gilt-lettered folders with the presidential seal, "Submission of Recorded Presidential Conversations to the Committee on the Judiciary of the House of Representatives by President Richard Nixon," a device that may have been hard to sell to the network men, served its purpose of impressing on the viewers that something substantial was about to be disclosed.

As it happened the week began with the first piece of good Watergate news for the Nixon Administration in more than a year, the acquittal of Mr. Nixon's first attorney-general, John Mitchell, and of his first secretary of commerce, Maurice Stans. Nothing can make respectable

Mitchell's and Stans's dealings with the campaign money channelled from Robert Vesco, and alleged by the Securities and Exchange Commission to have belonged rightfully not to Vesco personally but to his unfortunate shareholders.

The prosecution, however, did not succeed in showing that Vesco's generosity towards the Committee to Reelect the President had materially helped him in his difficulties with the commission.

Naturally, the question now arises of whether the other fallen chieftains of the first Nixon Administration, similarly faced with rather abstract charges like conspiracy and perjury, and similarly placed to pit their word against the word of prosecution witnesses not above suspicion themselves, may not also be going to get off.

Most prominent among the prosecution witnesses whose word the jury in New York chose not to accept is John Dean, President Nixon's former counsel and Watergate confidant. The White

House commentary prefacing the volume of transcripts concentrates on discrediting Dean: at some moment or other it will be Mr. Nixon's word against his.

Three points, however, need to be made before the odds against Mr. Nixon's impeachment are precipitately lengthened.

Dean's account of events has so far had much corroboration from other sources, not all of them public as yet. Other evidence exists that does not hang on Dean's credibility. The transcripts themselves, edited as they are, contain a great deal that is not to Mr. Nixon's credit.

A postscript to the White House commentary draws the conclusion that the acquittal of Mitchell and Stans "demonstrates the wisdom of the President's actions in insisting that the orderly process of the judicial system" be relied upon, not trials in the press and the media. It is this same President who has just by - passed the orderly processes of Congress by taking the impeachment question to the people over the head of Congress.

The effect may well be what Mr. Nixon must have intended: to make impeachment more of a party - political matter than it looked like being, and thus to improve his chance of eventual acquittal by a sufficient minority of the Senate.

The committee has not got the hard, incontrovertible evidence that it was seeking. It has to make do with a lot of vaguely discreditable dialogue instead. It may be forced to consume time in vain efforts to establish the authenticity and the completeness of what it has been given, and in the end it may be forced into delivering a party - political verdict - and that, without much doubt, is what Mr. Nixon has in view.