

The People's Verdict Is In

Even after President Nixon's recent TV address and press conference, most Americans still believe that he is not telling the complete truth about Watergate. Almost half (45%) actually believe that Nixon knew in advance about the bugging of Democratic National Headquarters last summer—an astonishing attitude, considering the lack of evidence on this point. Though they think that he was personally involved in what most of them regard as “a dangerous attempt to undermine the Constitution and our democratic process,” Americans by and large do not want him to leave the presidency. They have three main reasons for that stand: 1) they tend to blame the men around Nixon more than the President for creating the scandal; 2) they would be “dissatisfied” with Vice President Spiro Agnew as a replacement; and 3) they fear the probable impact, both at home and abroad, of the President's impeachment or his resignation.

Those are among the major conclusions of a special survey on Watergate conducted for TIME by Daniel Yankelovich, Inc. Perhaps the deepest-probing national study yet made on citizens' attitudes toward Watergate, the Yankelovich poll reached a scientifically selected national sample of 1,240 adults by telephone during two periods: the week before Nixon's Aug. 15 television speech and the week after it. An ad-

ditional smaller sampling of other citizens was taken after his Aug. 22 press conference.

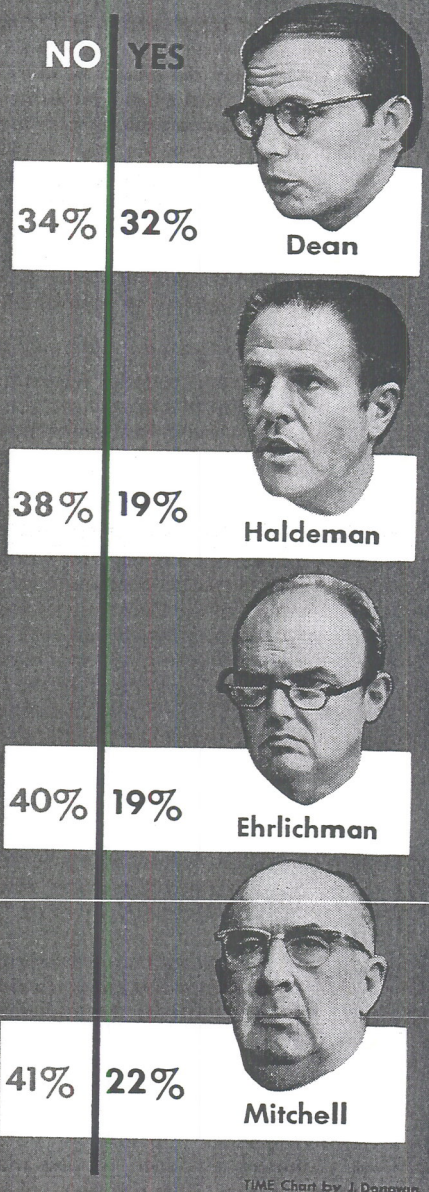
The poll's general consistency over the three periods seems to confirm that the public verdict is already in, and it is not likely to change. That verdict is, in effect, that the President is guilty of personal complicity in Watergate. But partly because they see no practical way of doing something about the President's actions without damaging the country, a majority (54%) of those polled say that they are becoming bored by the subject of Watergate.

Public Fatigue. This evidence of public fatigue might seem to support Nixon's recent strategy for dealing with Watergate. He has argued that the matter should now be left to the courts, so that his Administration can get on with pressing national problems. Some elements of Nixon's emerging strategy, however, seem to be unproductive and could even backfire. The poll discloses that 57% of the people questioned reject Nixon's suggestion that the Watergate investigation is an attempt by some politicians and members of the press to “get the President” (35% agree and 8% are unsure). White House criticism of the Ervin committee runs up against the finding that two-thirds of the people regard that committee as having functioned in a “fair and open-minded” manner. Almost two-thirds of those polled criticize Nixon's attempt to withhold the tapes of his Watergate-related conversations from the committee and the courts.

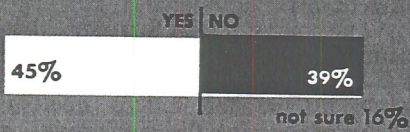
Overall, popular support for the President's position on Watergate is thin (see charts). Only 26% believe his repeated statements that he did not know about or take part in the cover-up. Of those who had heard or read about Nixon's television speech (a significantly large 73% had done so), only 39% thought that he was telling the full truth. This figure increased by a negligible 1% after his later press conference. The press conference did, however, provide one solid gain for Nixon: 22% of his listeners or readers said that they had greater confidence in him after it than they had had before.

The President's explanations of Watergate have corresponded closely with those of his closest former aides, John Ehrlichman and H.R. Haldeman, and in most respects with those of former Attorney General John Mitchell. Thus it is not surprising that many people believe that these men were lying too (see chart). Indeed, the percentage of people who think that Mitchell was lying increased after the Nixon press conference from 41% to 56%, despite one answer in which the President supported Mitchell's testimony. There would seem to be a paradox, however, in the

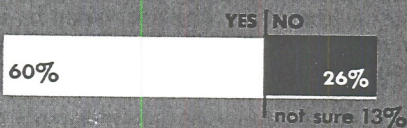
Q: Did the key witnesses tell the truth?



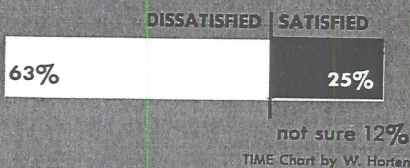
Q: Did the President know in advance about the Watergate bugging?



Q: Did the President know about or participate in the cover-up?



Q: Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the President's explanations about Watergate?



fact that many also disbelieve John Dean, the President's chief accuser and the man whose testimony conflicts sharply with that of the other aides. Yet Dean's credibility is somewhat higher than that of the other major Ervin committee witnesses.

One striking Yankelovich discovery is that the public is more concerned about events peripheral to Watergate than about the break-in and bugging of the Democrats. Half the people rate that operation as “just part of politics as usual.” But a majority see as “shocking” the break-in at the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist, the suggestion that income tax audits might be used against Nixon's political opponents and—tenuously tied with Watergate—the President's use of public money to improve his homes at San Clemente and Key Biscayne. Also described more often as “shocking” than “just politics” is the Watergate cover-up, including the use