President's Style Fuzzy in Private

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In the privacy of the Oval Office, Richard M. Nixon seems so much smaller in stature than the public figure known to the world.

His style of command, in private, has a distracted quality, a fuzzy feeling of distance from the world outside. His memory stumbles. He vacillates. He asks questions constantly, sometimes murkily.

The man who leads the nation is, indeed, terribly dependent on the White House aides who come and go with their tidbits of information, their bulletin recommendations. When the hard choices confront him, Richard M. Nixon displayed, in private, a certain squeamishness.

All of this is drawn, as a cumulative impression, from the reams of presidential dialogue released Tuesday by the White House, the tape-recorded and edited archives of how President Nixon confronted Watergate.

This portrait has a bittersweet edge for the man. It could help Mr. Nixon immensely in his present difficulties, persuading undecided congressmen who are weighing impeachment that the President really wasn't very well plugged-in to the cover-up going on around him, unlikely as that seems to his critics.

On the other hand, it may diminish the place in history he cares so much about. The Nixon who emerges from those 1,254 pages does not live up to the public's idealized notion of how a President operates. There are no thunderbolt decisions. He does not pound his fist confidently on his polished desk and issue historic commands.

The President himself

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noted the value of his isolation at several points in the rambling conversations. Watergate, he told John Dean, "will be somewhat serious, but the main thing, of course, is also the isolation of the presidency."

"Absolutely," Dean said.

"Because that, fortunately, is totally true," the President said.

The skepties, likewise, may urge that—because Richard Nixon knew at all times that he was talking into posterity's tape-recorder—his lack of details, his lapses of memory may be less than genuine. They suspect that occasionally, Mr. Nixon was talking for the benfit of the microphone.

At one point, for instance, his two closest aides, John D. Ehrlichman and H. R. (Bob) Haldeman, were discussing all of the many White House aides who knew something about the suspicious business going on after the Watergate break-in.

"There were 8 or 10 people around here who knew about this, knew it was going on," Ehrlichman estimated. "Bob knew, I knew, all kinds of people knew."

"Well, I knew it, I knew it," said the President.

Earlichman started to talk, but Mr. Nixon interrupted to correct his slip of the tongue:

"I must say though, I didn't know it, but I must have assumed it though. But, you know, fortunately, I thank you both for arranging it that way and it does show the isolation of the President and here it's not so bad."

This ambiguous quality, where the President seemed to say something, seemed to admit knowledge, then later took it back, is found again and again through the dialogues. It will be every reader's choice whether he genuinely was out-of-touch.

In the climatic meeting on the morning of March 21, for instance, John Dean told him quite specifically about the secret delivery of cash to Watergate defendants. At another meeting that afternoon, Mr. Nixon asked for the details all over again.

John Dean mentioned, in passing, that a campaign aide named Bart Porter had committed pre-arranged perjury as part of the cover-up. Mr. Nixon said he'd never heard of Porter—a comment which has special poignance because Porter was one of those earnest young men who testified that loyalty to Mr. Nixon was their sole motivation for the crimes they did.

A month later, Bart Porter's name came up again in briefing with Ehrlichman, who had to tell the President all over again.

"Where is he now? In jail?" Mr. Nixon asked.

"No, he's in business somewhere, and he will probably be indicted," Ehrlichman explained.

"They coached him to what, did he say?".

Mr. Nixon asked: "Was he —he was one of the buggers over there?"

"No, no. Oh, no," Ehrlichman said. "He worked for the committee." When the President got it straight in his mind, he expressed sympathy for the young man, a little fish caught in the net. "Poor son-of-a-bitch," he said.

In the early months of crisis, Mr. Nixon is often in the position of a cloistered king receiving fragmented battle reports from his courtiers. As the war grows more serious, the details become hopelessly complex, a mire of confused stories, who's blaming whom, who's in the soup, who can be saved. Haldeman and Ehrlichman hold a firm grip on the situation while Mr. Nixon asks hundreds of questions.

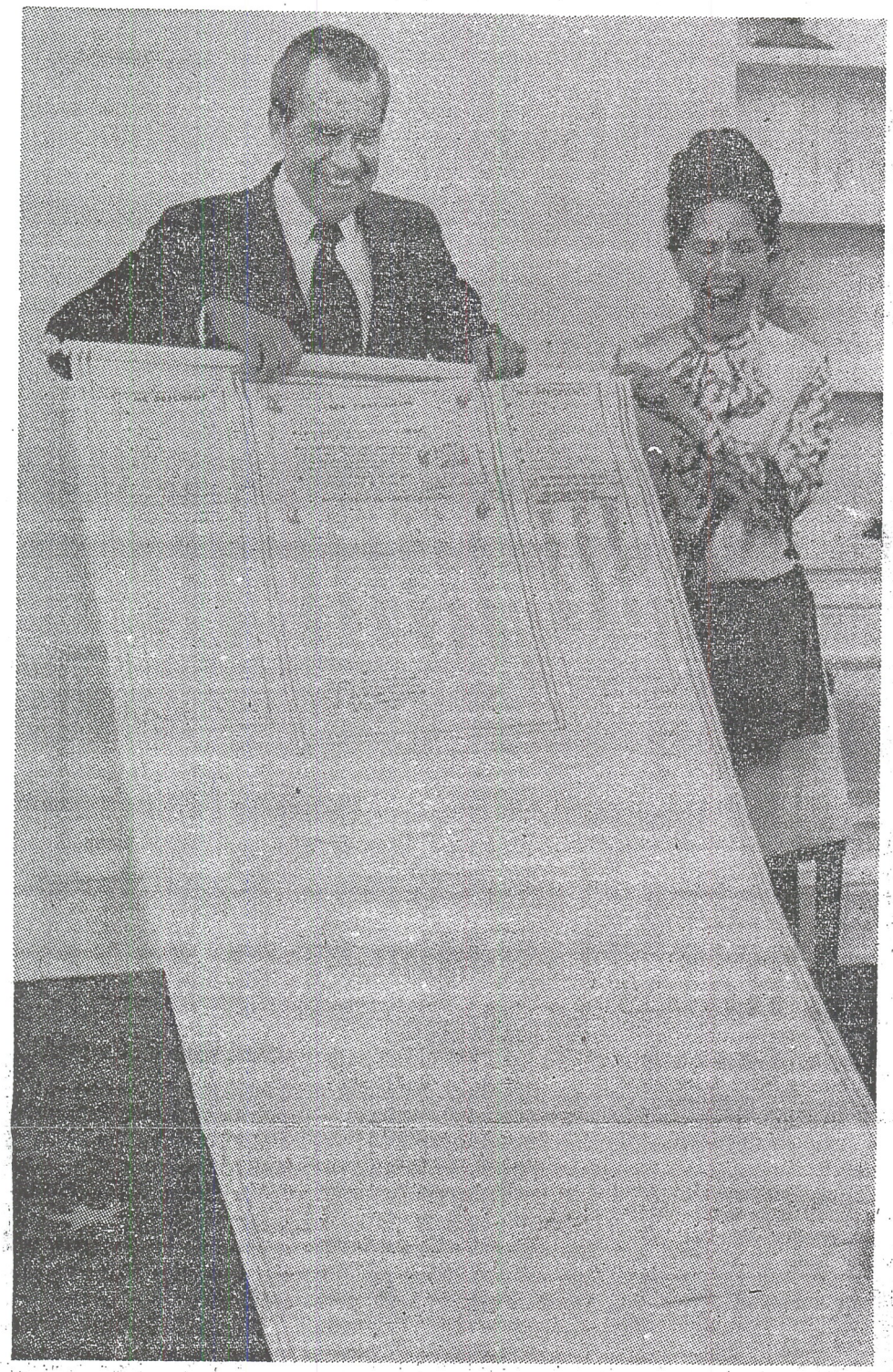
"Magruder's got no hope now? . . . What is Hunt going to say? Do you have any idea? . . . Will he say that Colson promised clemency? . . . How did it get to you then, John? . . . When did this happen?"

At one point, he expresses his confusion: "I don't know. Am I seeing something (unintelligible) that really isn't (unintelligible) or am I?"

As the crisis deepened, so did his anguish. On the Saturday of April 14, after spending virtually all of the day with Haldeman and Ehrlichman, blocking out the problems, anticipating a scandalous break in the case, Mr. Nixon called them both back that night and, speaking to Haldeman, sought reassurance:

"I just don't know how it is going to come out," he said. "That is the whole point and I just don't know."

A few days later, he told his press secretary Ronald Ziegler to inform the press "that since the 21st I've been working my tail off (on Watergate) which I have —I —I'm so sick of this thing, I



Associated Press

President Nixon happily unrolls a scroll of newspaper ads supporting him, a gift from Mrs. Francis Finnen, right, and Mrs. Leslie Dutton, both of Malibu, Calif.

want to get it done with and over. And I don't want to hear about it again. Well I'll hear about it a lot but I've got to run the country."

Throughout the ordeal, Mr. Nixon expressed a wistful sense of his symbolic presence as President, as though the presidency was a third person who could be kept away from all of this sordid business by the majesty of his office alone. The wistful thinking, in fact, may have been one of his central miscalculations—believing that Watergate would somehow go away in time.

"Sooner than you think," he assured his two trusted aides a few weeks before they had to resign their White House posts. "Let me tell you, John, the thing about all this that has concerned me is dragging the damn thing out. Dragging it out and being—and having it be the only issue in town. Now the thing to do now, have done—indict Mitchell and all the rest and there'll be a horrible two weeks—a horrible, terrible scandal, worse than Teapot Dome and so forth. And it isn't. Doesn't have anything to do with Teapot."

Yet, despite such talk, Mr. Nixon found it painful to act decisively in the heat of the crisis. He and his aides discussed over and over again the necessity of getting former Attorney General John N. Mitchell to step forward

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and take the rap for Watergate. They agreed it must be done, but Mr. Nixon said it would be "harder than firing Hickel," a former Cabinet officer dispatched during his first term.

"Oh, about the same," suggested Ehrlichman.

"Let me put it this way," Mr. Nixon said a few minutes later. "I can't watch (unintelligible) Mitchell—this is going to break him up."

The President was likewise reluctant about forcing a resignation from Haldeman, when his chief of staff became increasingly implicated. He talked, with some passion, to John D. Ehrlichman about the problem.

"Well, you know, you get the argument of some, anybody that has been charged against, you should fire

them," the President said. "I mean you can't do that. Or am I wrong?"

"No, you are right," Ehrlichman said.

"Well, maybe I am not right. I am asking. They say, clean the boards. Well, is that our system?"

Ehrlichman reassured him again.

Even when it came time to toss John Dean over the side, President Nixon displayed the indecision of a Hamlet.

"I have made a decision, he's to go," said the President.

His aide Ehrlichman corrected him: "Well, I'm not sure that's the right decision. By forcing the issue, I don't mean to imply that—"

"Oh, I see," said Mr. Nixon.

When they did decide together that it was time, Mr. Nixon did not quite carry it off. He was supposed to make Dean sign a predrafted resignation, but the young lawyer balked, knowing that it would deepen his own legal problems.

When the roof finally came down, the President relied substantially on Haldeman and Ehrlichman —future defendants—to sketch out "the scenario" of the White House defense case, explaining how the President ordered an investigation and got to the bottom of the whole mess on his own initiative.

That version of events became very important to Mr. Nixon at that point—especially the idea that he was on top of things. He expressed it repeatedly to those who were around him, including Assistant Attorney General Henry E. Petersen.

"The main thing, Henry, he said, "we not have any question, now, on this, you know I am in charge of this thing. You are and I am. Above everything else and I am following it every inch of hte way and I don't want any question, that's of the fact that I am a way ahead of the game. You know, I want to stay one step ahead of the curve. You know what I mean?"

It now seems, a year later, that Mr. Nixon will be better served if his extraordinary transcripts convince people that, as President, he was actually in the dark most of the way.