

## Letting It All Out

The U.S. press—often accused of nitpicking and verbal overkill—confronted a remarkable opportunity, a story in which verbal overkill was virtually impossible. The transcripts of the presidential conversations of Watergate, released by the White House around 2:30 p.m. last Tuesday, were almost half as long as *War and Peace*. The more of this mass of material that could be got to the public, the fairer and more useful the press coverage would be, and the better prepared the nation would be to judge Richard M. Nixon.

**Murine and Candy Bars.** Newsmen found the hardest job was just reading the document. That task, reports Peter Lisagor, Washington bureau chief for the Chicago *Daily News*, "was a full day's operation—with lots of Murine and candy bars for energy." The New York *Times* assigned nine Washington reporters and four editors to the transcripts. The Wednesday morning edition carried nine bylined stories and ten pages of transcripts, the first of a four-part serialization of the whole thing. The Washington *Post* put 18 reporters on the transcripts; most of them had been working on Watergate for months. Distributing the text in small chunks, they read all night and produced perceptive stories on a range of subjects, including John Dean's advice and Nixon's personality ("lonely, cynical") as revealed in the transcripts.

Besides scores of news and analytical stories, Associated Press and United Press International transmitted all of the estimated 350,000 words. Both carried it (at 1,050 words a minute) on high-speed wires normally used for stock quotations. For clients without high-speed facilities, U.P.I. also cleared one of its regular-speed wires; clacking away 3,500 words an hour, the transmission

lasted from Wednesday morning until Saturday afternoon. Says U.P.I. Night Editor Jeff Grigsby: "We've heard that at least 25 newspapers intend to carry the transcript in its entirety."

By week's end that estimate seemed conservative. In addition to full serializations in the New York *Times*, Washington *Post* and St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, one-shot Sunday supplements were scheduled in many papers, including the Los Angeles *Times*, the Louisville *Courier-Journal* and the combined edition of the Atlanta *Constitution and Journal*. The Portland *Oregonian* readied a 44-page supplement for sale this week (at \$1 a copy). Contrary to expectation, papers that have supported the President seemed as eager to practice full disclosure as those that have attacked him. The *Wall Street Journal* showed the split that often rends its front-page staff from its editorial-page staff. For three days the *Journal* ran Page One "leaders" that contained crisp summaries of the transcripts and interpretations critical of Nixon. But its editorial page was more cautious. One editorial concluded: "The President will not be impeached."

The Chicago *Tribune* accomplished both the coup of the week and a milestone in U.S. newspaper production. The paper got the entire document (in 44 pages) into most of its Wednesday morning editions. Behind that startling accomplishment lay a Monday-night decision by *Tribune* Publisher Stanton Cook and Editor Clayton Kirkpatrick, plus some inspired legwork by the paper's Washington staff. Early Tuesday morning, a *Trib* jet carrying three editors and two printing superintendents took off for Dulles Airport, where a copy of the transcripts arrived at 8:30 a.m., six hours ahead of the regular distribution. *Trib* executives would not reveal how they got their early copy. Says Kirkpatrick: "We knocked on every door in

Washington and finally found one that was slightly ajar." (The White House later admitted giving the *Trib* a head start because of the paper's plan to print the whole text.)

After the plane returned to Chicago, 18 typesetters produced a remarkably clear and error-free text that Chicagoans could buy the next morning—plus the paper—for the regular 15¢. The larger-than-normal press run of 800,000 virtually sold out, as did 1,200 copies flown to Washington Wednesday morning. The *Trib* spent \$50,000 on extra newsprint alone. The paper is now selling copies of the transcript for 50¢ and filling a heavy mail-order demand at \$1.50 each.

**Chautauqua Troupers.** The transcripts posed a different problem for TV and radio. The text seemed to offer little chance for visual excitement, while its sheer bulk prohibited complete on-the-air coverage (some noncommercial radio stations across the country have been staging marathon readings, however). By Tuesday evening, just hours after the release, all three networks had produced sharp analyses of key presidential conversations, particularly the March 21 meeting between Nixon and Dean.

Early TV laurels went to CBS, which on Wednesday devoted most of its 60-minute *Morning News* and an hour-long special that night to the transcripts. In both broadcasts the network made remarkable use of clips from the Watergate hearings and past presidential speeches. Viewers were treated to videotapes of the President and H.R. Halde- man last summer denying that "hush money" had been authorized for Watergate defendants and videotapes of John Dean testifying to the contrary before the Ervin committee last June. Then Dan Rather read a Nixon remark to Dean from the transcripts: "Just looking at the immediate problem, don't you think you have to handle [E. Howard] Hunt's financial situation damn soon?" Particularly helpful were readings from the transcripts by CBS newsmen taking the parts of the President (Barry Serafin), Dean (Bob Schieffer) and Halde- man (Nelson Benton). The trio stood behind 19th century lecterns like Chautauqua troupers and read tonelessly to avoid possibly inaccurate inflections. Nevertheless, they lent some human clarity to the welter of words.

That is the goal that newsmen all over the U.S. tried to achieve. Many succeeded so well that, as CBS's Eric Sevareid justly noted, "this city [Washington] and in a sense the whole country will find itself divided into two groups: those who will have read the entire document or very substantial parts of it and those who have not. Both groups will hold firm convictions about it, but only the first group will be entitled to its convictions."



CBS NEWSMAN BARRY SERAFIN READING NIXON LINES