

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

An Air of Unreality at the White House

Suspicion that the Nixon White House is dangerously out of touch with reality in its handling of the impeachment issue reached a new high just before the President's April 29 televised address announcing the release of an edited transcript of 46 taped White House Watergate-related conversations.

In an elaborate presentation in the Cabinet room, undisclosed until now, Gen. Alexander Haig, the White House chief of staff, played a segment from one of the tapes to astonished members of the Nixon Cabinet.

"It was a fantastic meeting," one official told us. Haig said that release of the 1,308-page transcript would finally prove the President's innocence in any Watergate coverup role. Then, after a thumbnail description of what Mr. Nixon would tell the nation half an hour later in his televised address, Haig flicked the playback switch on a White House tape machine, turned up the volume and let the tape run for two minutes. He did not identify the tape.

Secretary of the Treasury George Shultz, nearing his last day in office, sat stony-faced, arms across his chest, while the Nixon Cabinet was treated to what one called "a series of unintelligible screeching noises."

Haig explained that the tape in question had been "prepared" by White House technicians for maximum audibility, then said that anyone could understand why White House secretaries "have been climbing the wall around here" transcribing the tapes.

Around the table there was stunned silence. One Cabinet member whispered a question about the release of the tapes: "Why didn't they do this months ago?" But Haig himself was asked no leading questions. After switching off the tape, Haig told each Cabinet member to "make up your own mind" about the President's innocence and if they agreed he was innocent to get around the country and make the President's case.

That Cabinet meeting, with the President himself not there, marked only the second time the Cabinet has been briefed in advance of a Nixon Watergate statement. The first was April 30, last year, just before Mr. Nixon fired H. R. Haldeman, John Ehrlichman and John Dean III.

On that earlier occasion, Mr. Nixon's desperate hope that he had reversed the Watergate tide proved disastrously wrong. Yet the experience of one failure after another to get out from under Watergate seems to have made only slight impact on Richard Nixon's sense of reality.

Thus, when he flew west to Arizona and Washington state last Friday, the President was described by Republican politicians who accompanied him as "euphoric" from the impact of his April 29 speech and the release of the Watergate transcripts. Mr. Nixon talked animatedly about the fall campaign and how much he wanted to get around the country to help Republican candidates.

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"He must not be reading the newspapers," a leading Nixon supporter in Congress said later.

This appearance inside the White House of being out of touch with reality, moreover, led to major confusion about the President's decision on the release of new Watergate tapes to special Watergate prosecutor Leon Jaworski. In separate television panel shows Sunday, both Haig and James D. St. Clair, Mr. Nixon's Watergate lawyer, proclaimed no more Watergate tapes would be turned over either to Jaworski or to the House Judiciary Committee.

Then on Monday, St. Clair's request for a postponement of court action on Jaworski's subpoena for 64 more

Watergate-related tapes convinced the prosecutor's office that a deal was in the works.

Granting the postponement, federal Judge John J. Sirica said its purpose was to give St. Clair more time to arrange "possible compliance" with Jaworski's subpoena. The apparent reason: St. Clair had concluded that public and political pressure to turn over the 64 new tapes, all involving conversations on the main Watergate case from June 20, 1972, to June 4, 1973, would be irresistible.

But one day later, St. Clair made another astounding reversal, reiterating the original White House rigidity on no more Watergate tapes for Jaworski or the House committee. That reversal

restores and strengthens the White House hard line and is certain to line up many if not most Republicans on the Judiciary Committee behind a new House subpoena. It also appears to assure a historic court test which, unlike the similar confrontation last fall when Mr. Nixon backed down, could lead to a Supreme Court decision and a constitutional crisis.

In short, the extraordinary tape playback for Mr. Nixon's Cabinet, designed to mark his emergence to high ground, was only one more ominous shadow of the unreality pervading his presidency. It marked a new high in fantasy.