

Joseph Kraft

Part 5/12/74

'The Puritan Conscience Runs Strong'

The storm raised by publication of the White House transcripts demonstrates a point much forgotten late and soon. The United States remains a deeply moral country.

It has been easy enough over the past few years not to equate America with the New Jerusalem. The swag has been piled high as the Rockies, and the self-debauchery of getting and spending has gone on apace. Great power invariably has bred a casual acceptance of the doctrine that might makes right. Frustration in race relations has fostered a tolerance for unfair and even brutal practice.

Deep cynicism became the badge of the young. Five-year-olds learned not to be taken in by TV commercials. In Washington particularly it was assumed that men would lie and cheat and steal to stay in power.

It is not surprising, accordingly, that the White House released the transcripts without giving any thought to the impact they would have on moral feeling. Nor that Dean Burch of the White House staff said that the transcripts reflected "life as it is... in politics and business and industry." Nor that the Rev. John McLaughlin of the

White House staff would assert that criticism smacked of hypocrisy.

In fact, what looked like moral inertia in the country was only a refusal to accept idealistic nostrums for complicated economic, international and racial problems. Beneath that not unfounded caution, the Puritan conscience ran strong. The country was not blind to lies and cheating and browbeating and corruption, and nothing has showed it better than the character of the criticism made by the President's supporters.

Thus, Hugh Scott, the Republican leader in the Senate, spoke of a "disgusting and immoral performance." John Anderson, the leader of the Republican conference in the House, said the transcripts showed the President to be "totally lacking in moral sensitivity." And the Chicago Tribune found in the transcripts an "insensitivity to the standards of ethics and morality."

But if an absence of moral outrage would have been despicable, mere indignation does not lead very far. There is a vital difference, as the sagacious House Republican leader John Rhodes has made plain, between low behavior and evidence of impeachable actions.

On the latter issue, the case is by no means buttoned up.

The transcripts themselves add hardly anything. They show that the President did seem to coach his subordinates in perjury; that he refused to grant immunity in order to prevent the truth from coming out; that he seemed to approve a report that money was paid to the Watergate defendants to keep quiet.

But all of that was implicit in the Ervin committee hearings, and the indictments obtained by the special prosecutor. That so much is being made of the transcripts now suggests to me that the country and the Congress have not truly paid serious attention to the details of the Watergate case. I doubt, in fact, if half a dozen members of the Congress are familiar with the details.

The evidence is almost certainly there. The special prosecutor believes that a bribery payment was made on the strength of a decision taken by the President on March 21, 1973. The tapes which the Judiciary Committee has received from the special prosecutor apparently make that point, and the evidence of the tapes seems to be reinforced by witnesses.

It appears, moreover, that the Judiciary Committee counsel has more detailed and exact versions of the tapes than exist in either the White House or the office of the special prosecutor.

It also seems that the committee counsel has been doing a serious investigation on its own. And besides the obstruction of justice in the Watergate case, there remain possible bribery issues in connection with the ITT case, the milk producers' case and the connection between Bebe Rebozo and Howard Hughes.

But as the Judiciary Committee begins its impeachment hearings, the basic fact is that the case has to be laid out. The committee and its staff have repeatedly backed away from confrontation with the White House. By so doing they avoided traps in a truly impressive fashion.

Now they have to take the initiative. They have to present the evidence in an unmistakable way. Whether they can do it to the satisfaction of a Congress and a public which seem to have no capacity for absorbing large amounts of detailed information is unclear.