

Congress: Black Wednesday

The late Speaker of the House of Representatives, Sam Rayburn, used to marvel at "those rolling waves of sentiment" that would occasionally engulf the House, abruptly establishing a solid consensus. Last week even Mister Sam might have been surprised at the swift surge of revulsion that swept both chambers of Congress. It came suddenly on Wednesday, eight days after the release of the presidential transcripts. The turn seemed to come with the gathering flow of mail running as much as 10-1 against the President, the opportunity for enough of the busy Congressmen finally to read through much of the transcripts, and the chain reaction of exchanges among the members in cloak-rooms and over coffee. Whatever the exact process, a critical mass was reached, and with it the concatenation of judgments devastating to Richard Nixon.

In the outpouring of condemnation on Capitol Hill, Democrats could hardly be distinguished from Republicans, newcomers from oldtimers, liberals from conservatives. As if of one mind, the nation's legislators blurted out their reactions: "damaging," "disgusting," "embarrassing," "disgraceful." Observed a House G.O.P. leader: "It sure was a consensus. You just sat on the floor and felt it." Said Ohio Conservative Republican Charles Whalen: "It happened on Wednesday. It all just fell in."

Moral Squalor. What appalled Congress was not so much the evidence of particular crimes as the moral squalor revealed in the transcripts. "This is the most nauseating thing I have ever read," declared a hitherto 100% Nixon loyalist, Louis Wyman of New Hampshire, who is not given to overstatement. Said Republican John Ashbrook, a conservative Representative from Ohio: "I listened to the President on television last Monday night, and for the first time in a year I believed him. Then I read the March 21 [1973] transcript, and it was incredible, unbelievable." Complained Massachusetts Republican Congressman Silvio Conte about the transcripts: "I have a better quality of conversation with my staff than they have. I have a hard time reading them. I can't stand it." Declaring that the transcripts "really raise more questions than they answer," Illinois G.O.P. Senator Charles Percy said that neither the courts nor Congress can be "satisfied that this is the whole story and that no further evidence needs to be produced."

Pennsylvania Republican Senator Richard Schweiker, urging the President to resign, said: "I cannot remain silent in the face of the now obvious moral corrosion destroying the presidency." Senator Marlow Cook, a Kentucky Republican, acknowledged that Nixon must "realistically contemplate" resig-

nation, adding: "The President has irretrievably lost any claim to the confidence of the American people."

Most damaging for the President was the defection of some of his key supporters who influence votes. House Minority Leader John Rhodes warned Nixon that if his position continued to deteriorate, he might have to "consider resignation as a possible option." Rhodes spent a full afternoon on the House floor listening to one Republican after another as they all offered variants of "I've had it." Rhodes gave them no argument. Representative John Anderson of Illinois, the third-ranking Republican in the House, took a similar

Acting Roles in A Fellini Script

"This is a grim city," observed Senator Jacob Javits, the New York Republican. Indeed, the reaction to the tape transcripts and the opening of the House Judiciary Committee's impeachment proceedings imposed new standards of crisis measurement in Nixonian Washington. Pressure on the White House built to a new high that seemed intolerable, yet the prospect was for more of the same.

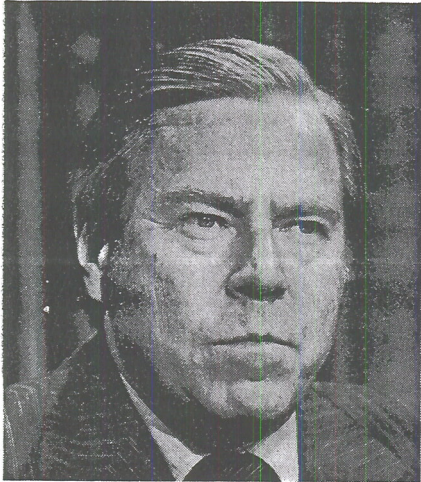
In emergencies, a standard Washington reflex is rumor. One rumor had the President suffering a stroke (disproved by his physical presence). Another had Attorney James St. Clair quitting the White House in disgust (denied by St. Clair, though he did acknowledge "wondering sometimes why I left Boston"). A third depicted Gerald Ford in full defection from the man who made him Vice President (an overstatement, but Ford was zigzagging). Among the more preposterous was the rumor that President and Mrs. Nixon were planning to divorce (a bit of gossip she passed on to her daughter Julie, who later reported amusedly: "She wanted me to help her think up an exciting third person"). Above all, there was the inevitable rumor that President Nixon would soon resign. The White House shouted no at every skeptical ear—Press Secretary Ron Ziegler even phoned the New York Times and fired off a denial—but the reports persisted, echoed and grew louder.

An air of unreality hung over the capital. A Senate staff man said: "You feel as if you are in a Fellini movie. It's in slow motion and it's disjointed." The bureaucracy slackened its pace. The notion that business goes on as usual was an illusion.



MICHAEL O'HALLORAN

SENATOR HUGH SCOTT



PAUL CORRELL

REPRESENTATIVE JOHN RHODES



WALTER DENNETT

SENATOR RICHARD SCHWEIKER



UPI

SENATOR MARLOW COOK

position. Claiming that the President had "damaged himself irreparably" by releasing the transcripts, he thought that the "welfare of the nation would be best served if Nixon considered voluntary resignation."

Perhaps the most fateful blow of all was delivered by Senate Minority Leader Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania, who had earlier insisted that the tapes would exonerate Nixon. Last December he had been given only part of the March 21 transcript by White House Chief of Staff Alexander Haig. According to his aides, Scott was "relieved" to be able finally to give his version of the story. Though he still called for "suspension of judgment" on the President's guilt or innocence in impeachment proceedings, he labeled the transcripts "deplorable, disgusting, shabby, immoral"—a description with which Rhodes said he agreed.

Did Scott include the President's performance in that description? He excluded no one, he said pointedly.

Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater is chairman of everybody's imaginary delegation of Republican elders who might some day call on Nixon and tell him to go. Goldwater has steadfastly declined the role, permitting himself some tart comment on Watergate but insisting that Nixon should not quit. Last week he was ominously quiet. In private, his aides said, he is despondent. "He thinks the situation is very, very grave," reported Tony Smith, his press secretary. "For a while he thought that profanity would be the major issue in the transcripts, but now he realizes it's more than that. The issue is: why the hell did Nixon never say, 'My God, you mean to say this was being done in the name of the White House?' We've been hearing for months

with each new revelation that it was the straw that would break the camel's back. But this really is the straw." Added Smith: "People are reading the transcripts. We are now hearing from the bedrock conservatives in Arizona, and they do not like what they are reading. They are telling us: 'We can no longer defend this man.' The only thing that is keeping Nixon alive is the slowness of the U.S. mails."

"Nobody's Perfect." Some of the President's hard-core supporters continued to defend him. Senator Strom Thurmond, Republican of South Carolina, said that he saw nothing in the transcripts that justified impeachment. Virginia G.O.P. Senator William Scott laconically commented on the President's role in the transcripts: "Nobody's perfect." Senator Wallace Bennett, Republican of Utah, criticized presidential crit-

Republican Congresswoman Margaret Heckler of Massachusetts found herself wounded by one phrase in the White House transcripts. "Heckler was great," John Dean had said, referring to an effort to block an investigation of laundered campaign money. Fearing damage in her campaign for re-election, Heckler denied the implication that she had been a White House captive. She hastened to collect television clips of previous statements so that she could prove her independence to her constituents.

Another bit-player in the drama, White House Assistant Leonard Garment, appeared almost happy. In the transcripts, he was shown to be a man who had the right ideas at the right time. In April 1973, as the Watergate cover-up continued to crumble, Garment suggested that Nixon first dismiss H.R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, then give a full public explanation of the scandal. But the architects of Nixon's disaster belittled Garment and his proposals. Now, compared with the more influential presidential advisers, Garment seems sensible and prescient. Former Newsman Patrick Buchanan, a White House special consultant who has often ravaged the press, suddenly had some modest praise for journalists. Hearing him, a Washington correspondent insisted, "Pat, it sounds like you are looking for work."

The Council of Women's Republican Clubs was in session during the week. And most members were unhesitating supporters of the beleaguered President. Pat Nixon was given a warm welcome; questions from reporters about the transcripts elicited cold stares. A newsman making a random check found few members who would admit to having read even excerpts of the transcripts. But one woman denounced the impeachment investigation as a "plot to destroy the two-party system." Mrs. Nixon

was reported to have read little if any of the conversations—but Julie and David Eisenhower ordered a full set on the day the papers were released.

At a party, a senior Nixon appointee caught himself in midsentence as he argued Nixon's case. "Why am I defending him?" he asked himself aloud. "I don't care if he is impeached." No such doubts afflicted Father John McLaughlin, a Jesuit who is a Nixon speechwriter. He is also an adroit Nixon apologist. McLaughlin explained Nixon's use of profanity as "a form of emotional drainage. The President is onstage so much that it becomes a form of release, almost therapy." McLaughlin went on television to predict that historians would judge Nixon "the greatest political leader of the last third of this century. He's going to be regarded as the greatest moral leader of the last third of this century." Which prompted AFL-CIO President George Meany, a devout Roman Catholic, to inquire with pointed skepticism about the broad-minded cleric: "I'd like to know where and when he holds confessions."

But Meany, like the rest of Washington, was not really in a joking mood. Decked out in a tuxedo to say goodbye to George Shultz, who was retiring as Secretary of the Treasury, the union chief summed up matters: "The American people have decided that Richard Nixon is not fit to be President."

A few Nixon men attempted to deflate that kind of talk. "Some of this suffocating moral outrage will diminish," said a White House adviser. "Our adversaries can hold that decibel level only for so long."

More typical of the Washington mood was the exchange about the President between a veteran newsman and an experienced capital lawyer. "He's Humpty Dumpty," said the reporter, remarking that the Nixon forces will not be able to muster a coherent defense. "No," the lawyer replied in a different metaphor. "He is a bull, maddened and racing ferociously around the arena, unable to shake the *banderillas* that pierce him everywhere. He still snorts and charges, but he is finished."

PAT NIXON GREETING MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL OF WOMEN'S REPUBLICAN CLUBS

