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The <sup>Post</sup>  
6/10/74  
Ambiance  
Of the  
Oval  
Office

Last month, in discussing the potential impact of the release of the presidential tape transcripts, Sen. Barry Goldwater remarked that "If you got a tape of any President in this century, with the exception of Calvin Coolidge or Woodrow Wilson, you would get the same reading, only worse." In this space, of late, aides to the last five White House occupants preceeding President Nixon have told us that was not, in fact, true of *their* man. Nobody spoke up for Coolidge or Wilson—or, for that matter, for Teddy Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, Warren Harding or Herbert Hoover.

Most tales out of school about Presidents have come from disgruntled members of their administrations, former White House employees, congressional enemies and/or eavesdropping reporters. Thus Mr. Nixon, even with all the editing and "expletives deleted," is at a disadvantage through the release of the tape transcripts. He can't even balance it off by making public, say, his talks with Henry Kissinger — though no one can be sure what that might include, given the Kissinger involvement in wiretapping of his own assistants.

Ambiance in the oval office, of course, is a relative thing, dependent entirely on the nature of the President himself. Franklin D. Roosevelt, as James Rowe wrote, ran things with "charm." Harry Truman, George Elsey rightly said, was "serious," "sentimental," "stubborn." Dwight Eisenhower, Emmet John Hughes explained, was essentially non-political. John F. Kennedy had "idealism," humor, a sense of purpose," as Pierre Salinger put it. And Lyndon B. Johnson, among other things, could be "tough." Joseph A. Califano Jr. told us. All true; all fond memories; all only part of the complexity of most of our Presidents.

*Leaving aside their special relevance to an investigation of Watergate crimes and improprieties, President Nixon's tape transcripts have provided a unique glimpse of the character of the President and the men around him and of their way of transacting business. Today Chalmers Roberts, who covered the last five administrations as a Washington Post reporter, offers his own comment on the reminiscences of former assistants to Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson.*

FDR, wrote Robert Sherwood, at times "displayed a capacity for vindictiveness which could be described as petty" and on occasion he had a stenographer secretly taking down presidential talk with visitors. Truman was too loyal to associates whose acceptance of questionable gifts brought disrepute to his administration. Eisenhower was lazy and once confessed that he was "the captive of whatever people my appointment secretary says I have to see." Kennedy conned the reporters and privately admitted he lacked the political guts to get out of Indochina until after his expected second term. Johnson destroyed himself by shading the truth, or worse, on Vietnam. He also enjoyed boasting of reading raw, unevaluated FBI reports about who called at what embassy.

To go back further in history, what would the public have thought if it had known that Wilson, that pious Presbyterian, could let loose "a tornado of masterful profanity" as the Secret Service chief later testified? Coolidge slept 11 hours a day and he, like every President from Benjamin Harrison on,



saw no reason not to accept Andrew Carnegie's gifts of kegs of Scotch whiskey until Wilson ended the practice. Of Warren Harding perhaps the less said the better. But can you imagine the tape of his rendezvous in a coat closet off his White House office with Nan Britton, the woman who bore him a child conceived in his Senate office?

We tend to judge Presidents by our own standards, or at least by what we conceive to be the standards of our times. Probably Wilson's use of "son of a bitch" would have been sensational news if it had become public. When Kennedy called the steel barons "sons-of-bitches" the reaction had less to do with his profanity than with his attitude toward big business. And whatever the "expletives deleted" by Mr. Nixon may have been, they were hardly more earthy than those of Lyn-



don Johnson, which many of us heard in the same Oval Office and elsewhere in the White House. Still, there is no transcript of that profanity, despite Mr. Nixon's repeated efforts to imply that LBJ, too, had been in the taping business.

The common thread that runs through the articles in this space by the five presidential assistants is that, while their man may have had a wart or two, he never descended to what Califano characterized as the "sordid" conversation, the "amoral" discussions and the "basely animalistic" instinct for self-preservation that the Nixon tapes disclosed. Each writer cites the higher purposes of his President in struggling to meet the foreign and domestic challenges of his time, in essence the rising above mere politics to

do the nation's business in the national interest as he best conceived it.

Well, they all did have warts of varying magnitude. Those who lived out their terms either wished they had not done things they did do or had done things they did not do. So do we all. Most of us, certainly Presidents, hope to be judged by our positive accomplishments. Some are, some are not. FDR was a colossal figure historically; Truman outlived the petty men of his administration to become highly admired; Eisenhower more and more is now adjudged a better President than many thought, at least in foreign affairs. JFK's thousand days were too short, alas. It is too early to pass a final judgment on LBJ, though his domestic accomplishments have had massive effect.

Grant and Harding were our most notable failures, though neither himself was judged corrupt; both were weak Presidents whose presumed friends took advantage of them in terms of sheer greed. Harding knew it before he mercifully died in office; in his last year he almost throttled to death one of those who had betrayed him. Grant lived through the pain of disclosure. The Teapot Dome affair was exposed after Harding's death.

Richard Nixon hopes to live in history for his foreign policy accomplishments, whatever the exact contributions to them may rightly be credited to Henry Kissinger. It may be, however, that Watergate, and the transcripts as an integral part of that now generic term, will not let it happen that way.

FDR, beset by a congressional uprising against his plan to reorganize the executive branch, once issued a public statement saying: "A: I have no inclination to be a dictator. B: I have none of the qualifications which would make me a successful dictator. C: I have too much historical background and too much knowledge of existing dictatorships to make me desire any form of dictatorship for a democracy like the United States of America." But that, as startling as it may seem today, is not the same thing as having a President who feels it necessary to say that "I am not a crook."

It has often been noted that the Watergate affair lacks both the money greed and the sex angle that have been normal to so many of our political scandals, national, state and local. The case of former Vice President Agnew, with its secret cash payments in plain envelopes, fits the norm of most past

scandals. The Nixon case escapes comparison to any that has gone before. The other instance involving impeachment proceedings, that of Andrew Johnson, was on wholly different grounds.

The President once said to John Ehrlichman, the transcripts show, that the way to wind up Watergate was to indict John Mitchell and others "and there'll be a horrible two weeks—a horrible, terrible scandal, worse than Teapot Dome and so forth." And Mr. Nixon comforted himself by adding that "there is no venality involved in the damned thing, no thievery or anything of that sort of thing."

Presidents, certainly most of them, have tried to keep secret or brush under the rug the embarrassments of their administrations, especially if they have touched the White House. How many have done so successfully we will, of course, probably never know. The Nixon transcripts, however, have put on the record for our children's children to read a story of such appalling lack of standards, moral or otherwise, on the part of a President himself as we have ever seen or heard before.

It is this which separates the Nixon case from all previous presidencies. Whatever the outcome of the impeachment proceedings, the congressional probing, the court battles yet to be concluded, the Nixon presidency stands apart from all its predecessors as far as the historical record demonstrates—thanks in very large part, though not solely, to the transcripts of the presidential tapes. And it is for this reason that Messrs. Califano, Salinger, Hughes, Elsey and Rowe can be forgiven the gloss of their fond looks backward to their years in the White House. Their Presidents in their oval offices did, indeed, create an ambiance a gulf apart from that of Richard Nixon.