BEST SELLER!

A Novelist Looks at "Verbal Evil" and the Presidential Transcripts as Bedside Reading.

By Larry McMurtry

The most worthless of mankind are not afraid to condemn in others the same disorders which they allow in themselves; and can readily discover some nice difference of age, character, or station, to justify the partial distinction . . .

—*Edward Gibbon*

On April 14, 1973, the President uttered what is in my view the most elegant sentence in the whole of the Watergate transcripts:

"I will have some consommé," he said.

The simple finality of that utterance could hardly be improved upon; yet it is by no means the most appealing note Mr. Nixon strikes.

The most appealing note, I believe, was struck a few weeks earlier, on March 27th, when the President seemed suddenly to observe that a brightness had fallen from the air.

"I wish it were Friday," he said—even as might the maid that milks and does the meanest chores. That remark, at least, has the ring of truth; and what could be more American, nowadays, than a yearning for Friday afternoon?

It was left, however, to Mr. H. R. Haldeman to make the most unequivocal statement of those that have so far been rendered audible. This statement came out of nowhere in that fateful conversation of September 15, 1972, and was in reference to the Speaker of the House.

"Well, (expletive deleted) the Speaker of the House," Mr. Haldeman said.

It may be, of course, that Mr. Haldeman said something old fashioned, like "Dadgum the Speaker of the House," but then again it may have been something a touch more forceful, since it is quite clear that Mr. Haldeman is the only member of the Inner Circle with even a slight gift for sexual metaphor. On April 8th—by which time scarcely any brightness is left in the air—it is Mr. Haldeman who is obliged to tell the President that, as he sees it, "Rape is inevitable."

"That's the problem," Mr. Nixon concedes.

In fact, one could read this whole massive document—by which I mean the fat, blue, 1,308-page Government Printing Office text of the submitted Presidential conversations—as the record of an attempt by the President and his aides to prevent the rape that so quickly came to seem inevitable. In this quite obviously vain endeavor the concept of the Presidency functions as a kind of chastity belt, something to be buckled around as many people as possible in order to prevent the sanctity of the Oval Office—itself a wickedly suggestive term—from being rudely breached by their enemies in the press and in the Congress.

The breach occurred, of course; the Oval Office has been had. Indeed, it must seem to the occupants that something analagous to a gang-rape is still in progress, with the courts, the Congress, and the press jostling one another in line while a vast, red-faced populace looks on, happy as only a people can be who have found just cause for moral indignation.

A desire to understand and if possible participate in this moral indignation led me to sit down and slog through the whole 1,308-page record of Presidential resistance. I was hoping that just this once I could be as disillusioned and morally indignant as everyone else, but, alas, when the book was finished my moral pulse seemed to be beating no faster than it had been beating when I began to read. I find myself more intrigued by the outcry than by either the men or the events that caused it, and I fear this would be the case even if the transcripts were complete, and not under the suspicion of being what Mr. Henry Petersen would call "cultured testimony."

This is not to say, however, that I think

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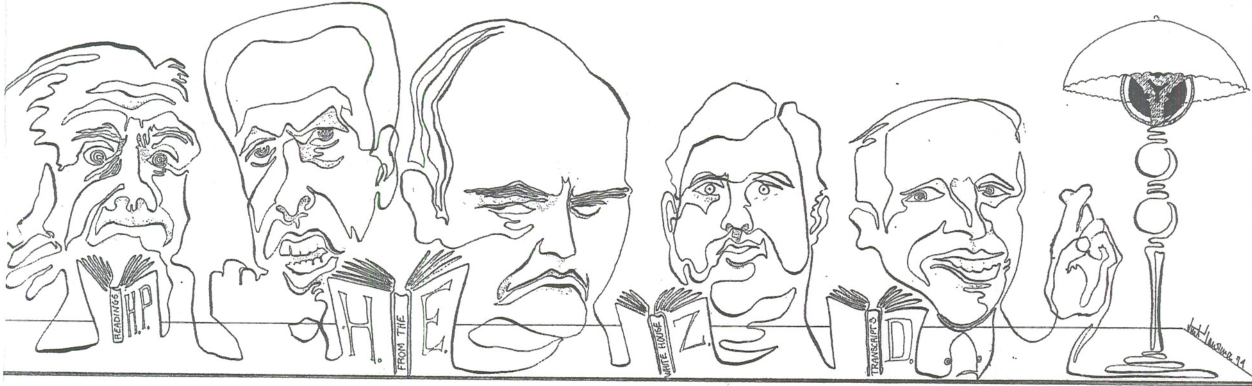
Illustrated by Vint Lawrence



President Nixon stands exonerated. Far from it. The poverty of his imagery alone is cause for high indignation. I can see how a President might have difficulties being honest, in these times, but there is really no excuse for such ineloquence. After all, a great many of our Presidents have been, like Mr. Nixon, practiced hypocrites; how can we tell the great men from the small except insofar as they put things well? Jefferson and Lincoln were not always noble men, but when the occasion demanded it they were always capable of a noble prose, and what a difference that can make to a people's sense of themselves. A leader with real eloquence can almost singlehandedly sustain a national spirit, as Winston Churchill proved.

Alas—looking to Mr. Nixon for eloquence is like looking to Arizona for truffles. Reading the transcripts straight through induces in one a state of emotional numbness such as might occur if one were for some reason compelled to sit down and read the collected works of Samuel Beckett seven or eight times in the course of a week. It is as if "Waiting for Godot," "Krapp's Last Tape," and "Endgame" had been crudely spliced together; as drama its only virtue is that it could be simply staged —perhaps one could use giant Oval Office wastebaskets instead of ashcans. The small cast, the limited vocabulary, the over-riding repetitiveness and monotony of the dialogue, the passivity, the mental immobility, the sense that even one's doom is going to turn out to be dull—all these are suggestive of Beckett.

It is obvious, too, that the four principals—President Nixon, Mr. Haldeman, Mr. Ehrlichman, and Mr. Dean—all have a persistent sense of themselves as being characters in a drama. The terminology of the screen, or, at least, of the television studio is omnipresent in the dialogue. The fact that they talk continually of presentation rather than of policy is only one more clue, if any more were needed, that we have entered the Age of Advertising. "Playing well," has obviously become a first principle of political survival, and, that being the case, it is rather curious that no one at the White House has understood McLuhan well enough to dissuade the President from reducing his conversations to the cold, forbidding medium of print.

I had hoped, in this essay, to consider what might be called character dynamics within the inner circle, but a close reading of the transcripts fails to reveal any very subtle dynamics, or any very substantial character, either. E. M. Forster once drew a famous distinction between flat and round characters—flat being one-dimensional and predictable, round being complex, inconsistent, and capable of performing tragically. Working from that, one would have to say Haldeman, Ehrlichman, and Dean are all essentially flat as pancakes; the two former resemble the flat characters in Dickens, while the last more nearly resembles a flat character in Proust. President Nixon, if not fully round, at least sometimes tends toward rotundity. He is, to a degree, a different man with different people. Haldeman and Ehrlichman are always priming him to lower the boom on Dean, and the President continually assures them that he will; yet when he is with Dean he not only doesn't lower any booms, he becomes rather Dean-like. His attitude toward the public softens, and at times he even begins to sound public-minded. Haldeman and Ehrlichman have an attitude toward the public that is roughly comparable to the attitude of a dog toward a bone.

Despite this, of the four principals, it is Mr. Haldeman who seems to be the most likeable, the most trustworthy, and the easiest to cast. If the little capital letters were removed from the margin of the pages there would be times when one might be lulled into supposing that Mr. Haldeman were the President; but not many times, really. He is too simple and too direct to have ever got to be a President. In a John Wayne movie he would be played either by Ward Bond or Ben Johnson; if it were a war movie he would be a Marine sergeant, and his fate would be to be shot in the back in the last reel, while saving the mission.

"We are so (adjective deleted) square that we get caught at everything," Mr. Haldeman says on March 20th, and that classic bit of American understatement really sums the whole matter up nicely. Mr. Haldeman's funniest moment is when he accuses Colson of having committed "verbal evil" in promising Howard Hunt that he would be out of jail by Christmas, though it is almost as amusing to hear him assure the President that John Dean is not "unAmerican and anti-Nixon." What, I wonder, would Mr. Haldeman make of a person who was unAmerican and pro-Nixon?

As for Mr. Ehrlichman, the late Edward G. Robinson could have done him perfectly, although Mr. Robinson at his meanest probably holds an edge in likeability. Mr. Ehrlichman has the mentality of a hanging judge, if not, indeed, of a hangman. He is perhaps most quotable in his April 14th remark about John Dean:

> *"It's a question of role and I don't think Dean's role in the aftermath, at least from the facts that I know now, achieves a level of wrongdoing that requires that you terminate him . . ."*

Mr. Dean, despite the low level of wrongdoing he managed to achieve, would have been a challenging role for the young Peter Lorre. Imagine Peter Lorre delivering the classic line that Mr. Dean reports himself as having delivered to Gordon Liddy:

> *"I am never going to talk to you about this again, Gordo."*

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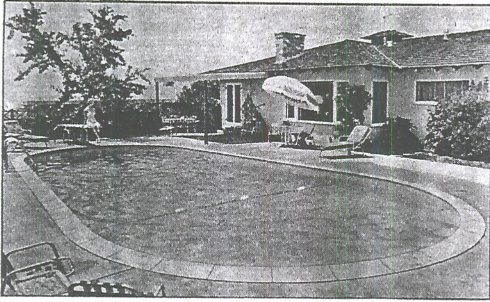
Summer is for SWIMMING...



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Tapes, *from page 13*

Mr. Dean would make a somewhat pallid Iago, admittedly, and yet there is something about his relationship with the President that calls Iago to mind. The operation is their Desdemona, and it is usually Mr. Dean, not Haldeman or Ehrlichman, who provokes the President's most interesting and most passionate responses. In the September 15 conversation, for example, the President answers Dean with a statement that might have come straight out of Hemingway:

"We are all in it together. This is a war. We take a few shots and it will be over. We will give them a few shots and it will be over . . . "

One might observe that the language of the transcripts as a whole derives from Hemingway, but it is Hemingway filtered through his pulp-magazine imitators into B-movie dialogue, which is where the Inner Circle probably picked it up. Usages derived from old private-eye movies are pervasive. "Heat" is to be put on the Speaker of the House, Magruder is apt to "finger" various people, some of whom will be required to "take a dive." Even the fastidious Mr. Dean is not above referring to "the beauty parlor," and the most with-it idiom I can find occurs when Mr. Nixon is briefly contemplating taking what he calls "the hang-out road," i.e. letting it all hang out.

Usages derived from Westerns are rare, although at one point those ever-dangerous Kennedys are said to be "laying in the bushes, waiting to make their move." Throughout, the paucity of historical reference is extreme: for all practical purposes history began with Alger Hiss and will very likely end with Watergate. The only book mentioned is Malcolm Smith's study of Kennedy's 13 worst mistakes, and except for a single reference to Gethsemane and another to Teapot Dome there is nothing in the transcripts to indicate that any place but the District of Columbia exists or has ever existed. The most sophisticated use of analogy that occurs comes when Mr. Dean assures the President that, if only he can have his way, selling their position will be just like selling Wheaties.

There is one other sense in which the President might be said to derive from Hemingway. One of the latter's most famous remarks was that what is moral is what you feel good after—a remark the President could probably relate to. The transcripts provide a crude, but vivid, example of how situation ethics operate. The President is so totally pragmatic in his approach to life that I doubt his consciousness can draw even the thinnest line between what is practical and what is moral; yet he is acutely aware that there are people who are less intensely practical than himself. Right away, in his first conversation with Mr. Dean, he points out that a number of these people are members of his own party:

"The people who are most disturbed about this . . . are the (adjective deleted) Republicans. A lot of these Congressmen, financial contributors, etc., are highly moral. The Democrats are just sort of saying '(Expletive deleted) fun and games.' "

At another point Mr. Nixon feels obliged to make clear that he is talking about "the vulnerabilities, not the moralities." His pragmatism shows up time and again in his verb choices. At one point he refers to "when we did Cambodia," and then a few pages later he tells Mr. Ehrlichman that he has to "do church." His subtleties are sometimes funny, as when he points out, in reference to the culpability of White House secretaries, that "there is a difference between actors and noticees," and his enthusiasms sometimes lead him into verbal anticlimax, as in his encomium to Mr. Kenneth Rush:

"He is articulate, he's (unintelligible), he's respected. He's one of the towering figures of the ambassadorial world and in the bar. He's no slouch."

Despite all this, Mr. Nixon does not really suggest Hemingway, and despite his long, rambling utterances he does not really suggest Samuel Beckett. The writer he does suggest, I believe, is Mr. Henry James. Mr. Nixon's reticence, his hesitancy, his occasional primness (at one point he refers to the whole business as an "unseemly story"), his willingness to dwell upon minute, even imperceptible distinctions, his constant need to state, restate, and ultimately refine his position, all these are Jamesian qualities; and I would bet, too, that the reticence, the hesitancy, and the emotional remoteness are characteristics of the real man and not merely attributable to the fact that he knew a tape was running and that he had potentially criminal matters to conceal. At one point he tells John Dean that "when I look at my watch it's not because I have an appointment," anticipating the anxiety he feels he may be about to create. James, of course, was the master of his language, while Mr. Nixon is frequently the slave of his, yet in both cases there is the sense that an extreme of sensibility has been reached.

The difference is that Mr. Nixon's sensibility is entirely political. He shows himself to be a man who is as compulsively, as intrinsically, and as inescapably political as Henry James was compulsively, intrinsically, and inescapably literary, and the style of his politics is very likely going to bring about his downfall. Americans, it would seem, demand a facade of virtue from their Presidents which is possibly as incompatible with the practice of high politics as it would be with the practice of high art. In recent decades Presidential virtue, or, at least, Presidential probity has become the lonely pillar that supports the myth of our national innocence, and for Americans to have to think of themselves as other than innocent is an excruciating moral ordeal. President Nixon, through his unremitting, compulsive practice of the craft that raised him so high, has now inadvertently forced this ordeal upon us. He cracked the facade, broke the pillar, and brought the myth tumbling down in our laps; our innocence is tarnished forever, or at least until 1976, and at this rate that is going to seem like forever. We certainly won't forgive Mr. Nixon for this, and if we

high official in MPD, who asked not to be identified. "They like freedom of action, to be cut loose from red tape. They need a great challenge.

"We study each one psychologically. Each has to have talent as a keen observer. He has to have psychological finesse—to be able to instantly read the atmosphere he's in and react appropriately. They're unsentimental, impersonal. They are able to keep their secrets.

"Some come from the Academy, but they lack street sense, or enough knowledge of the law, and they don't have the report-writing ability—one of the main things that puts a suspect in jail is a goddamn typewriter. Details put him in jail—right down to the buttons on his shirt.

"Some have a long life span, although that's pretty much dependent upon the size of the area they have to work. The smaller it is, the greater his chance of being recognized."

On one of his recent cases, Eyman, sitting between two "bad dudes" was waiting for a dropman to appear with the heroin of a buy. As the man came into the room Eyman recognized the dropman as a felon he had arrested only two weeks before. He had to pull his gun and escape.

"The key to an agent's success," continued the official, "is that he can act quickly, improvise. He can find himself in an entirely new situation and think of ways to deal with it that no one here has taught him. With that kind of individual, it's hard to get him to go back into higher, more uninteresting uniformed duty. So most stay out on the street."

Even before the release of Wiley, Eyman had destroyed any and all traces of his official identity. He left his revolver, his police identification card, and billfold at the office. He replaced his car, taking the brand-new white Cadillac coup de ville the Department had leased for him under a false name. He emptied his rented Washington flat of anything federal: any government ball-point pen, every franked envelope or note-pad—anything that could lead to his bona fides 'being blown'—disclosed.

The Department had taken pains with his concocted identity. It was the custom to try to keep the initials of the orig-

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weren't such an impeccably law-abiding nation I imagine he and several of his friends would already be hanging by their heels underneath some lamp post on Pennsylvania Avenue.

Blaming a President for being political while sitting in the Oval Office is perhaps a little bit like blaming an orange for containing orange juice just at the moment that it comes ripe. What I find surprising in the public outcry is that anyone is shocked by the grossness of Mr. Nixon's scheming. Mr. Nixon, after all, has been in public life, and thus in the public view, for some twenty-five years, and he seems always to have behaved pretty much as he is behaving now, if not worse. We knew him well before we made him President and it seems not a little quixotic of America to have expected that the mantle of leadership would somehow transform him into Abraham Lincoln or Winston Churchill, or whoever it is we now fancy he should be. He is Richard Nixon, and if we have learned anything from history it is that the mantle of leadership corrupts at least as frequently as it ennobles.

On March 13, 1973, Mr. Nixon had this to say about what was about to take place:

"No, I tell you, this is the last gasp of our hardest opponents. They've just got to have something to squeal about . . . They are going to lie around and squeal."

His repeated use of the verb squeal has a grim, almost savage ring, but accurate. I think we are going to hear some terrible squealing in the next few months, for what is underway now is a purification rite straight out of *The Golden Bough*. Our temporary king has accidentally drawn to himself the national guilt—over race, over Vietnam, over how many decades of casual public corruption and private turpitude?—and the ritual won't stop until his heart has been cut out and laid on Plymouth Rock, so that the crop of our innocence will grow again.

Before it is over, Mr. Nixon may come to wish that he had tried a little harder to get that cesspool for Winnetka. We are still a nation that is grateful for small blessings, and, after all, he is probably going to need some place to live. ■

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