

Sept. 15, 1972: 'This Is War'

P at 5/19/74

President: They should just, uh, just behave and, and, recognize this, this is again, this is war. We're getting a few shots and it will be over and we'll give them a few shots. Don't worry. (unintelligible) And I wouldn't want to be on the other side. Would you? I wouldn't want to be in Edward Bennett Williams', Williams' position after this election.

Dean: No, no.

President: None of these bastards—

Dean: He, uh, he's done some rather unethical things . . .

President: Yeah? . . .

Haldeman: Keep a log on all that.

Dean: Oh, we are, indeed we are.

President: Yeah.

Haldeman: Because afterwards, that is a guy—

President: We're going to—

Haldeman: That is a guy we've got to ruin.

President: That's right, the main, main thing is The Post is going to have damnable, damnable problems out of this one. They have a television station.

Dean: That's right, they do.

President: And they're going to have to get it re-newed.

Haldeman: They've got a radio station, too.

President: Does that come up too? The point is, when does it come up?

Dean: I don't know. But the practice of non-licenses filing on top of licensees has certainly gotten more—

President: That's right.

Dean: More active in the, this area.

President: And it's going to be goddamn active here.

THESE ARE EXCERPTS from the House Judiciary Committee's transcript of the tape of a conversation in President Nixon's office on the evening of Sept. 15, 1972. Since their publication in this newspaper a few days ago (they were not in the authorized White House version of the transcript), the White House in the persons of Gerald Warren and James St. Clair, the President's press spokesman and his attorney, has explained their omission this way: In the first place, the White House says, both matters were unrelated to Watergate; and, in the second, "in reality, neither Mr. Williams nor The Washington Post was victimized by the administration as a result of the presidential threats. It is these two premises we would like to explore today.

It is true, to take up the second explanation first, that Mr. Williams hasn't been "ruined" and that The

Washington Post Co., though facing a collection of challenges to its broadcasting licenses from some of Mr. Nixon's closest associates and supporters, has so far survived the "damnable, damnable problems" the President so emphatically promised as a consequence of its coverage of Watergate matters. The question is whether, even in the absence of demonstrable damage at the hands of the President—and we are not prepared to concede this point in relation to the harassment of The Washington Post via television license challenges—there is not a gross abuse of office here. For what Mr. Nixon is suggesting in these passages can by no stretch of the imagination be considered a part of his constitutionally authorized duties or prerogatives. He is threatening to use the powers of that office for purposes of naked retaliation and reprisal against a private citizen and a private enterprise who had not offended the law—but who had apparently offended Mr. Nixon.

Is not this particular misuse of public office for purposes wholly unrelated to the public interest what Watergate is all about—what Watergate has come to mean as a consequence of the activities of the "plumbers," the cover-up artists, the money launderers, the cable forgers, the document shredders, the would-be IRS manipulators and the rest? And is it not the fact that Mr. Nixon's rage at both Mr. Williams and The Post proceeded in that conversation from the role of each, one as lawyer and one as newsbearer, in pursuing the Watergate case? Yet the President's spokesmen now airily inform us that by their own definition of Watergate, as an issue appropriate to the House Judiciary Committee's impeachment proceedings, none of this is relevant.

Mr. Nixon would have us believe that he was at all times keen to find out all the facts there were to discover of any possible connection of his minions with the Watergate burglary itself. So, of course, was Mr. Williams in his law firm's capacity as counsel for the injured party, the Democratic National Committee. And so (in our humble way) were we. Somehow, in this squalid conversation, we do not find on the part of the President or his associates that same zeal for either the legal or journalistic discovery processes. Instead, Mr. Nixon and his aides can scarcely avoid interrupting each other in their enthusiasm for plotting their revenge for the embarrassing and threatening discoveries that had hitherto been made. In a manner with which we all have been familiarized over the past couple of years of revelations, Mr. Nixon was looking about for instruments of government power of doubtful propriety, not to say legality, to use against those who seemed to be interfering with his personal political interests. We can think of no more proper and relevant object of interest for those who have been charged with getting to the bottom of Watergate.