

President in Private: Lonely, Cynical

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Above all, the private Nixon seems a lonely man, profane and cynical and isolated by his own suspicions, certain of his enemies, occasionally contemptuous even of his friends.

The private Nixon was talking to his White House lawyer when the name of an ally came up. A friend, the lawyer advised. The President replied with an unprintable expletive.

"Nobody is a friend of ours," Mr. Nixon said. "Let's face it! Don't worry about that sort of thing."

This other Richard M. Nixon who exists in the privacy of the Oval Office is now exposed to public scrutiny. His character is defined by his private conversations, the jokes and slurs, the rambling dialogue contained in 1,254 pages of transcript released by the White House yesterday.

As the President warned on television Monday night, his private por-

trait is less than flattering. The White House editors have substituted a standard phrase—"expletive deleted"—to clean up his language, but any imaginative reader can fill in the profanities.

The talk has a coarse edge that conflicts rather drastically with Mr. Nixon's manner of speaking in public. "Have you kicked a few butts around?" And: "I am not going to screw around with this." And: "What in the (expletive deleted) caused this?"

But, more important, the hours and hours of presidential chit-chat—much of it with his former counsel John W. Dean III—reveal that the siege mentality which dominated the Nixon administration in its first term, which created so much of the rationale that led to Watergate, emanated from the man himself.

Listen to his instructions to John Dean about the White House enemies, issued in the autumn of 1972 when

Mr. Nixon was coasting to a landslide electoral victory:

"I want the most comprehensive notes on all those who tried to do us in. They didn't have to do it . . . They are asking for it and they are going to get it. We have not used the power in this first four years, as you know. We have never used it.

"We have not used the bureau [the FBI] and we have not used the Justice Department but things are going to change now. And they are either going to do it right or go."

"What an exciting prospect," his counsel interjected.

"Thanks," said the President. "It has to be done. We have been (adjective deleted) fools for us to come into this election campaign and not do anything with regard to the Democratic senators who are running, et cetera. And who the hell are they after? They are after us. It is absolutely ridiculous. It is not going to

See NIXON, A17, Col. 1

President: Lonely and Cynical

NIXON, From A1

be that way any more."

Several months later, when the Watergate scandal was creeping toward White House involvement, Mr. Nixon spoke more directly, more bitterly of his opposition.

"No, I tell you this is the last gasp of our hardest opponents," the President said of the swirling controversy. "They've just got to have something to squeal about it."

Dean agreed.

"They are going to lie around and squeal," the President continued. "They are having a hard time now. They got the hell kicked out of them in the election. There is not a Watergate around in this town, not so much our opponents, even the media, but the basic thing is the establishment.

"The establishment is dying and so they've got to show that, despite the successes we have had in foreign policy and in the election, they've got to show that it is just wrong because of this. They are trying to use this as the whole thing."

At another junction, he expressed his contempt for the press and his private delight when they complained about government reprisals.

"Well, one hell of a lot of people," said the President, "don't give one damn about this issue of the suppression of the press, et cetera. We know what we aren't trying to do it. They all squeal about it. It is amusing to me . . ."

The glimpse of his private character is, of course, not entirely fair. All political figures undoubtedly behave in different ways when they are not before an audience of citizens. Amid all of his other troubles, it was Mr. Nixon's bad fortune to have such a voluminous record of his private personality spread across the record of history.

The hard edge, the icy wisecracks, the brutal judgments on fellow politicians—all these may be remembered more vividly than the ceremonial Nixon who appears on television from time to time. Through it all, there is also a certain tone of wonder in his words. He cannot quite grasp the meaning of Watergate or its dangerous implications for his presidency. Once, talking by phone with his ex-campaign manager John Mitchell, the President concluded with a quip:

"Okay, John, good night. Get a good night's sleep. And don't bug anybody without asking me. Okay?"

Why should everybody be so shocked, he kept asking, by the bugging and burglary at the Democratic National Committee?

"You know," he said, "when they talk about a 35 year sentence [for the Watergate burglars], here is something to think about. There were no weapons! Right? There were no injuries! Right? There was no success! Why does that sort of thing happen? It is just ridiculous!" (characterization deleted.)

At another point, he belittled the Watergate wiretap as a "dry hole." He wondered aloud why the burglars broke in when they did, rather than earlier. He scoffed at the GOP "dirty tricks" operation as a routine feature of American politics, though ineptly run by Donald Segretti.

"(Expletive deleted)," said the President. "He was such a dumb figure. I don't see how our boys could have gone for him. But nevertheless, they did. It was really juvenile. But, nevertheless, what the hell did he do? What in the (characterization deleted) did he do? Shouldn't we be trying to get intelligence? Weren't they trying to get intelligence from us?"

"Absolutely," said the then-loyal John Dean.

"Don't you try to disrupt their meetings?" the President wondered. "Didn't they try to disrupt ours? (Expletive deleted). They threw rocks, ran demonstrations, shouted, cut the sound system and let the tear gas in at night. What the hell is that all about? Did we do that?"

If Mr. Nixon's private view of politics seems rough-and-tumble, he also showed a brittle edge toward his associates. Charles Colson, he said, "talks too much" and is "a name dropper." Once, Mr. Nixon remarked that the Democrats probably didn't blame him personally for Watergate but "they think I have people capable of it. And they are correct—in that Colson would do anything."

L. Patrick Gray, his nominee for FBI director, was the butt of Oval Office jokes. "He is just quite stubborn," the President observed, "and also he isn't very smart."

When John Dean reported that Senate opposition was building to Gray's confirmation for the FBI post, Mr. Nixon seemed pleased.

"That's great," Mr. Nixon said. "That's a vote really for us because Gray, in my opinion, should not be the head of the FBI. After going through the hell of hearings, he will not be a good director as far as we are concerned."

He also expressed a low regard for some institutions of government, the political games played by the FBI under previous Presidents, the distrust he felt for the CIA and FBI and his utter disdain for Congress.

"Congress is, of course, on its (inaudible)," the President remarked. "And yet they are so enormously frustrated that they are exhausted. Isn't that the point? . . . It is too bad. We can

take very little comfort from it because we have to work with them. But they become irrelevant because they are so damned irresponsible, as much as we would like to say otherwise."

But the presidential dialogue also discloses some soft spots in the man. He admires a fighter, someone with the same gritty determination which has sustained him through his own up-and-down career. One of those heroes was the late J. Edgar Hoover, whom he contrasted to the shifting and retreating Gray.

"Hoover performed," Mr. Nixon said. "He would have fought. That was the point. He would have defied a few people. He would have scared them to death. He has a file on everybody."

And President Nixon, these transcripts reveal, has a nostalgic obsession with his own past—particularly his investigation of Alger Hiss 25 years ago, the event that first made him famous.

Again and again, while consulting with aides on Watergate, Richard Nixon turned to that old episode for reflection. At one point, he compared his own relentless digging with the inept congressional investigations of Watergate.

"I conducted that investigation with two (characterization omitted) investigators—that stupid," he said. "They were tenacious. We got it done."

"Then we worked that thing. We then got the evidence, we got the typewriter, we got the Pumpkin Papers. We got all of that ourselves. The FBI did not cooperate. The Justice Department did not cooperate. The administration would not answer questions . . ."

John Dean listened to the reminiscence and offered a wry aside.

"Funny," he said, "when the shoe is on the other foot, how they look at things, isn't it?"