

# Truth and the Presidency

“GOOD EVENING. I want to talk to you tonight from my heart . . .” Thus the President of the United States, on April 30 of last year, alerted the American people that he was about to level with them on Watergate, going on to speak of how the office he held was, in his view, “a sacred trust” and one of which he was “determined to be worthy.” It was a very moving affair, and it also was—as we now know—fake. Evidently a lot of people think that reading the edited transcripts of presidential conversations of that period, which were made public by the White House last week, represents the ultimate experience in disillusionment and disgust. But we can go them one better—or perhaps we should say one worse. If you have a masochistic streak and a hardy constitution, we recommend that you read those transcripts of private conversations against the concurrent public statements the President was making—and continues to make—to you. The only word that comes to mind is one that is usually “deleted” or “unintelligible” where presidents are concerned, or at the very least “inaudible.” It is *lies*—systematically, willfully and repeatedly told by the President of the United States.

We are aware that it is in the age-old tradition of politics to exaggerate and to put the brightest possible construction on the most dismal and damaging of events. But Mr. Nixon’s stark misstatement of facts with which he was wholly familiar is in another order of things, and it persists. What is so odd about the public response to this phenomenon is that our preoccupation with our new-found legal and constitutional lore has all but blinded us to the implications of what Mr. Nixon has done. After all—one can presumably argue—he wasn’t *under oath* in all those television addresses “from the heart,” so how is that either an indictable crime or an impeachable offense? Indeed, the nation as a whole has become so immersed in these aspects of the degradation of the presidency that somehow it is considered “all right” for Mr. Nixon to take to the airwaves, stare the nation in the eye, invoke the sacred trust of the highest office in the land—and then say things he knows to be utterly false.

How many times has Mr. Nixon told you now that on March 21 of 1973, upon learning for the first time of the involvement of members of his administration in the Watergate burglary and cover-up, he ordered the bearer of the news, John Dean, to prepare him a full written report of the facts and that John Dean never did so? It was, he informed us last May 22, a key part of “an intensive effort of my own to get the facts and to get the facts out.” Well, as the transcripts of the period show, March 21 was not the first time Mr. Nixon learned of his aides’ involvement, and the subsequent efforts he made could hardly be called fact-finding missions. The so-called Dean report, as planned and discussed by the President and Mr. Dean and Messrs. Haldeman, Ehrlichman and Mitchell was to be a cooked up,

incomplete document which the participants in the meeting all but wrote in advance of Mr. Dean’s sojourn in Camp David. As the ineffable Mr. Ehrlichman put it at one of these planning sessions, “You have to bottom your defense, your position on the report. And the report says nobody was involved, and you have to stay consistent with that.” How did he know what the unwritten report would say?

In fact, the transcripts of the period suggest that anything but an “intensive effort” to “get the facts and get the facts out” was under way. “What the hell does one disclose that isn’t going to blow something,” Mr. Nixon asks at one point, and the substance of his remarks has mainly to do with cover-up and what is called “damage limitation” in the world of arms control. He and his colleagues move easily and habitually back and forth between the hard practical language involved in figuring out who will be thrown over the side to save the others and the weird parody language of the public statements they will subsequently make. As in:

Ehrlichman: And I am looking to the future, assuming that some corner of this thing comes unstuck, you are then in a position to say, ‘Look, that document I published [the so-called “Dean Report”] is the document I relied on, that is, the report I relied on.

President: This is all we knew.

Haldeman: That is all the stuff we could find out—

Ehrlichman: And now this new development is a surprise to me—I am going to fire A, B, C, and D, now.

And again:

Ehrlichman: You could say this. You could say I have never had a communication with anybody on my staff about this burglary—

President: Therefore—

Ehrlichman: Or about Segretti, prior to—

President: Segretti, Segretti is not in this court so that is no problem.

Ehrlichman: Well—then alright—

President: I had never had any—

Ehrlichman: Since I had no communication with anybody on the White House Staff about this burglary or about the circumstances leading up to it, there is no occasion for executive privilege in this matter.

President: With regard to this, I want you to get to the bottom of it. So there will be no executive privilege on that. On other matters—

Haldeman: And that takes you up to the June 17th. What do you do after June 17th?

President: Use the executive privilege on that.

These were not truth-seeking sessions or anything remotely like them. They were coaching classes. They were script writing sessions. They were dress rehearsals

for further deception.

Speaking of his March 21, 1973, conversation with Mr. Dean, the President last August solemnly informed the public that Mr. Dean on that occasion had told him that

funds had been raised for payments to the defendants, with the knowledge and approval of persons both on the White House staff and at the re-election committee. But I was only told that the money had been used for attorneys' fees and family support, not that it had been paid to procure silence from the recipients.

Early this March, however, when the tape of that conversation seemed likely to become public, the President, equally solemnly informed the people of the reverse. On that same day and in that same conversation, he now said, Mr. Dean "told me that payments had been made to the defendants for the purpose of keeping them quiet, not simply for their defense." Questioned about this revelation a short while later, the President explained that what Mr. Dean had really done was to "allege" that hush money payments had been made, so that the President could hardly be sure enough of the allegation to refer it to the Justice Department. But now, as the transcripts tell us, Mr. Nixon did not receive the information as an "allegation" at all: he accepted it as a fact and repeatedly suggested that Mr. Dean had better make sure the next installment got out in time to keep the menacing Howard Hunt quiet.

There are throughout these transcripts, even in their edited incompleteness, endless examples of this sort of presidential duplicity in dealing with the public, and his very description of what they say *now that they have been published* continues to vary sharply from the evidence of our eyes. How are we to account for this? What depths of cynicism must a public man draw on to be able to issue printed material and simultaneously to say it contains something it does not? Maybe Mr. Nixon himself believes that anything not said under oath, anything that does not qualify technically as an indictable crime or an impeachable offense in the narrowest construction of that phrase, can be perpetrated by him with impunity. Maybe he thinks the public is too dumb to notice or too insensitive to care or too trusting of a man who holds the office he holds to question his public utterances—especially when he looks us in the eye and says, in effect, Trust me—I am your President.

It is that trust—that reservoir of respect for the office and that unwillingness to believe that a President would systematically deceive—that Mr. Nixon has so exploited and abused. He continues to do so. As a consequence, whatever his personal political fate turns out to be in the next several months, we will be picking up the wreckage of the American presidency for years to come.