

Charles McCabe Himself

He Knows What He Meant

IF YOU have been for three decades a dedicated Nixon-watcher, as I have been, you learn in time to pay no great heed to what the man says.

What you look for is nuance, a word the President is not likely to use — now or ever. You look for what he does NOT say, for the meaning between the lines, for the Freudian slip, for the fustian confession, the boast that admits the opposite, like the guy in the locker-room who tells you how many virgins he has ravished in the past six hours.

Mr. Nixon's latest exercise in saying nothing, but in revealing quite a lot, was at his press conference of March 6, when he denied he approved hush money and executive clemency for Watergate burglars then in prison. For an old Nixonologist this was a rare performance.



The burning question at this press conference was the heart of the Watergate business. A federal grand jury of ordinary citizens had sent a presentment to Judge John Sirica along with its indictment of six former White House figures. There was widespread speculation that this document, together with supporting evidence, constituted an indictment of Mr. Nixon, which the grand jury did not hand up because it had been advised that a sitting President cannot be indicted on a criminal offense.

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THE PRESIDENT'S political alter ego, H. R. Haldeman, had been accused of lying by the grand jury when he said Mr. Nixon said it would be

“wrong” to give hush money to the defendants. Mr. Nixon had earlier backed up publicly this Haldeman version of one of the critical conversations between himself, Haldeman and John Dean. The grand jury was in possession of tapes of this meeting. Therefore, it appeared, the grand jury had called Mr. Nixon a liar also.

At the press conference Mr. Nixon conceded that the White House tape of that March 21, 1973, meeting could be subject to “different interpretation” by different people. The President then said:

“What I say is that I know what I said, I know what I meant, I know what I did, and I think that any fair-minded person will reach the same conclusion that I have repeated here several times tonight.”

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TO THIS particular fair-minded person, here is a remarkable statement, a mint condition example of how the man's mind works. The press conference was called hastily by the President because the grand-jury's indictments and sealed document had put him in the hottest water he has felt yet. He doubtless had a pretty good idea, by this time, of what the grand jury had sent to Judge Sirica, and inferentially, to the House officials looking into impeachment.

What the President proposed in his statement is that the American people make a stupendous suspension of disbelief when they learn the contents of that March 21 tape. The President asks that we accept, with the agility which comes so readily to him, that what he said and what he MEANT can indeed be two different things. If Mr. Nixon should say, perchance, that black is white when he MEANT it was black, we are to follow humbly the bellweather.

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THIS IS CARRYING the doctrine of mental reservation to the point where the mind of an 18th century Jesuit would boggle. We are, in effect, asked to believe that anything the President may be proved to have said, about anything, may be invalid because the words did not mean anything, they did not really encompass the meaning. This was known only to the speaker.

In the phrase bequeathed western civilization by Mr. Nixon's intellectual butler, Mr. Ron Ziegler, the President now has among his immense powers the ability to render anything he says which is incriminating “inoperative” because, no matter what he said, he knew what he meant.