

What Mr. Nixon Meant

Just when all the world wonders what Mr. Nixon really "meant" by his use of the word "wrong" in the crucial March 21st meeting with John Dean, Mr. Nixon himself (in his recent session in Chicago) provides us with what might be a useful clue. He tells us a good deal about his meetings with his advisors and even defines a word one might hear used there — the word "wrong."

In the context of preserving confidentiality, he says that a President would "be surrounded by a group of eunuchs insofar as their advice is concerned, always fearful that sometime in the future, if they happened to give an opinion that turned out to be wrong, that they would be held responsible for it. Wrong, I'm not referring to being illegal, but wrong in terms of whether or not it worked. In order to make the right decision you have to have opinions expressed very freely, discussed very freely from an extremely wide range."

Is this a description of meetings like the crucial one of March 21st, in which all options on clemency and hush-money were discussed in a wide-ranging way? In such a meeting, Mr. Nixon apparently might use the word "wrong" and not be referring to illegality or immorality at all. If he meant, on March 21st, that Dean's suggestion was "wrong in terms of whether or not it worked," then it indeed sounds conspiratorial. Some have construed his meaning on March 21st, in just that way, and now their contention is supported by Mr. Nixon himself. I think we ought to listen to him on the point, for he knows what he meant.

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