

It Can't Really Be True

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, May 2—There must be some mistake about all these spectacular documents on the Watergate. These conversations can't have happened in the White House. "P" must stand for Prendergast or some other county courthouse boss. It's ridiculous to suppose that the President would bug himself and then publish his own indictment.

Consider the facts. For over 25 years, Richard Nixon has been complaining bitterly about his enemies in the Congress and the press who have criticized him as a shifty opportunist. Why, then, would he publish a document that makes him look more shifty and opportunistic than anybody ever charged?

Mr. Nixon came to power proclaiming the "new morality," and arguing for "law and order." So how could he possibly have agreed to pay blackmail money to burglars, or agreed that the Attorney General of the United States should arrange the pay-off or instruct his aides in the arts of avoiding perjury before a grand jury? This is all too bizarre.

All sorts of charges have been made around here against Mr. Nixon, but everybody agrees that he is an intelligent man and an experienced lawyer. But in these Watergate documents,

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which are supposed to represent his thought, Mr. "P" often comes out confused, inarticulate, indecisive, and even vague about the elements of the law. The documents have to be wrong.

Anyway you look at it, this whole thing is irrational. Mr. Nixon is a master politician, who won the Presidency in 1972 by the largest margin in the history of the Republic. How then could he end a war and still lose the support of the country and even of his own party within eighteen months?

How could he spend his life mastering the techniques of public relations, surrounding himself with advertising men to command public opinion, with lawyers, to keep him out of trouble, and with cops to preserve his privacy, and end up losing public support, and privacy, in the deepest public trouble?

Richard Nixon is a cautious and conservative man, but if these docu-

ments are correct, he was reckless. What he said in one public statement at the beginning of his crisis was contradicted by what he said in another public explanation of the "facts." On the eve of releasing the documents that would "tell all," he claimed things the documents denied. Even his opponents couldn't believe he would be that clumsy.

Besides, the personal conversations in these White House excerpts of the tapes are not believable. Outside of his old friend John Mitchell, who addresses him in this tactical jargon as "Mr. President," there are no manners, and certainly no discussion of right or wrong. Even John Ehrlichman and H. R. Haldeman, whom he regards as his closest advisers, almost as his sons, talk on these do respect him—like equals to the President. That makes it all the harder to comprehend.

There has to be a mistake about all this and particularly about the President's approach to the Congress. If the news is right, he has treated the House and the Senate, particularly the Judiciary Committee of the House, with contempt. He will live or die, on what the House and the Senate do, but he argued his case on television before he gave his documents to the Judiciary Committee and in the short run, he divided the committee along partisan lines.

But members of the House are beginning to read the transcripts now, with wonder and anger, and thinking about who will restore the integrity

of the Government if they don't. The President has won the first round, but his tactics, his language, and his contempt for the Congress are beginning to create a new situation.

There is something mad about all this. The White House announces that the President is going to "tell all." The reporters rush to the press room. They are handed a book of over a thousand pages, about as big as a telephone book, just before the President goes on television.

And then, when he gets on television, he has behind him, not one book but a stack as big as a refrigerator, and he waves at this vast pile as a symbol of his generosity of giving it "all," and the reporters look at these television tricks with disbelief.

It can't be true, they say. There must be some mistake. The White House can't possibly still be playing games, still trying to limit the question to the Watergate brea-in alone, still trying to insist that impeachment can result only from criminal offense and nothing more, still trying to keep the lawyers and the technicians from checking the tapes, and leaving it all to Representatives Rodino and Hutchinson, and the television.

Obviously, it must be a fantasy. Maybe they sent the wrong evidence to the Hill, pulled out the wrong door, or misunderstood the question. Nothing like this could happen in the White House. The President couldn't lose his honor in order to save his job. There must be something wrong!