

A facing of facts

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NEW YORK — This is a very tough column for me to write, but events this week make it imperative. The essence — or lead as we say in the newspaper business — is that President Richard M. Nixon has made it impossible for me to continue believing what he claims about himself in the Watergate mess.



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That's about the most reluctant statement made here in the last 20 years. It probably will disappoint, surprise and maybe even shock a lot of people. If so, they will have nothing on the disappointment, surprise and shock I have felt in reading those transcripts of the White House tape recordings during the past few days.

Now any more or less regular reader of these weekly editorial comments knows how consistently the President has gotten my backing — and properly so. Even his worst enemies now have to admit that his strategy for ending the Vietnam War was

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correct. And absolutely no one can fail to praise his many remarkable initiatives toward a more peaceful world.

It also was proper—certainly in my book—to continue to back and defend the President as strongly as possible when the Watergate scandals began leaking all over the place. As a loyal American, to me it seemed only natural and necessary to be loyal to the nation's elected leader, to accept his explanations and deplore the excesses of his accusers. At the very least, like everyone else, he should be presumed innocent until proven guilty.

That was my consistent position, expressed here many times and in many ways. Not that it was easy. In my heart I often felt he probably knew a lot more than he admitted. And it certainly became obvious, despite his claims of executive privilege and national security, that he was far from being as forthright as the people and the Congress had a right to expect.

The real reason for his uncooperative stalling tactics is now abundantly and terribly clear. It is all in the tape transcripts he finally was forced to make public. Even in their heavily edited and possibly inaccurate form, the transcripts add up to as damning a document as it is possible to imagine short of an actual indictment.

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MAYBE, TECHNICALLY, the President still is justified in claiming he knew nothing in advance about the Watergate break-in, or of the initial cover-up efforts. The point is that those shameful tapes reveal a man totally absorbed in the cheapest and sleaziest kind of conniving to preserve appearance, and almost totally unconcerned with ethics.

The man seems to have a moral blind spot. To me it is simply astonishing that he would make the transcripts public with the avowed belief that they would exonerate him. They may not actually amount to a conviction of criminal behavior. Perhaps the kindest way of putting it is that they amount to an unwitting confession, in which he stands convicted by his own words as a man who deliberately and repeatedly tried to keep the truth from the American people.

I am not being heartless or simple minded about this. Over the years I have known quite a few presidents and am very much aware of the often ruthless — even deplorable — actions made necessary by the pressures of their awe-

some power. But I have never heard anything as ruthless, deplorable and ethically indefensible as the talk on those White House tapes.

The voices on the tapes, even the censored parental guidance version, comes through like a gang of racketeers talking over strategy as they realize that the cops are closing in on them. Scene after scene sounds like a corny old movie. How can we cover up this and that? How much dough do we need to pay off so and so? Who's going to take the rap for this and that?

An odd fact is that the boss in these sessions — to this reader, at least — fails to radiate even a whiff of the authority of Edward G. Robinson or Jimmy Cagney in the movies, or even Chicago's Big Bill Thompson in real life. Instead the other members of the gang all clearly felt free to keep coming up with tricky ideas and chew them around with as much apparent authority as the chief.

In this sharing of power, this speaking as equals, the atmosphere was solely one of intrigue and self-protection. If any of the participants — ever — gave any consideration to what was right for the nation instead of themselves, then I must have missed it in the thousands of words I have waded through.

Think how impossible it would have been for any of the Founding Fathers or for Abraham Lincoln to have tolerated two minutes of it.

I also think of Eisenhower — as easy-going a president as we ever had. He instantly chopped off his strong right arm, Sherman Adams, the man who was running the country for him, when his chief aide committed the impropriety of accepting gifts from a man seeking business with the government.

To Lincoln, to Ike, and to most of our Presidents, the White House itself had to be just that — a house of pristine integrity, both in reality and appearance.

The symbol of America's faith in its government is sullied beyond measure when it is used as headquarters for a gang whose main concern is the maintenance of personal power — at any cost.

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AS WAS DECLARED in the opening paragraph, this is a tough column for me to have to write. Perhaps some of what has been said is overly tough. Certainly it is not my intention to join the persecutors of Richard Nixon.

All the same, honesty and a natural concern for my country's dignity compel me to face the facts and declare myself as best I can. This is something that Richard Nixon, unhappily for both himself and the nation, has repeatedly refused to do in the Watergate affair.

As noted, it is amazing to me that he doesn't seem to realize how damning those tape transcripts are. Even more amazing is the fact that an astute politician, which he is, failed to realize that cleverness is no match for demonstrable truth.

From the very beginning of Watergate I thought he would sit tall and straight in the saddle. His White House clean-up at least partially confirmed my expectations. But then he proceeded, in one razzle-dazzle move after another, to show that he was going to resist Congress and the press in their every effort to get the full truth.

Practically all of his troubles, including the impending threat of impeachment, would have been avoided if he had only had the honesty to tell the whole truth right away. Lacking that, he certainly should have stuck by his original contention that nobody has a right to examine the intimate records of the presidency.

Over a year ago, in this column, the opinion was expressed that only the Supreme Court has the authority to decide whether such records may be opened or not. It was the President's steady retreat from defiant positions — plus the suspicions and renewed attacks each retreat created — that finally compelled him to release at least part of them.

He released them only because he had to, finally, and because he somehow thought the censored versions would do him some good with the public. God knows what the unexpurgated tapes would show.

Incredible? It sure is.

Sickening? Just read the transcripts.

Today, sitting here in a kind of stunned sorrow, it is hard for me to imagine why any informed person would not see the inevitability of impeachment.