

The Transcripts Convey

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The 1,254-page blue book of private presidential conversations issued last week by the White House is roughly equivalent to the little boy in the storybook who saw something funny about the emperor's new clothes.

Now the dirty little secret is out. The President, this one at least—is a mere mortal, as flawed and harried as the rest of us, maybe more so. Maybe they all were.

"After all," Richard M. Nixon said, "it is my job and I don't want the presidency tarnished, but also I am a law enforcement man."

Perhaps, as they say in the Oval Office, that is the "bottom line" from Mr. Nixon's dramatic decision to unveil the reams of intimate dialogue between him and his various aides. The presidency is a tarnished idol. Quite apart from what happens to Mr. Nixon or what those transcripts prove or fail to prove, the office itself will not seem quite so majestic to Americans, perhaps for a long time to come.

It was not just that Mr. Nixon spoke so crudely in private, a different voice from the piety of his public speeches. Nor was it the looseness of the conversations, the rambling and mind-drugging repetition, asking and answering the same questions over and over again. Nor even the casual familiarity of his two top aides, Haldeman and Ehrlichman, who seldom called him "sir" or "Mr. President," as White House legend requires.

What is most startling, what is transmitted so starkly throughout the material is the utter frailty of the man in the office. That comes through clearly, whether you think the text proves him guilty or innocent, maligned or malignant. A man imprisoned by his

powerful position, lurking behind that enormous American icon called the presidency.

"Here's the situation," his aide, John Ehrlichman, instructed at one point. "Look again at the big picture. You now are possessed of a body of fact."

"That's right," said the President.

"And you've got to—" said Ehrlichman. "You can't just sit here."

"That's right," said the leader of the Western world.

"You've got to act on it. You've got to make some decisions..."

The nagging question is whether anyone should be surprised by what these documents tell us about the nature of office itself. Unfortunately for Mr. Nixon, it is unlikely that any other American President will ever be scrutinized as closely in his private dealings. Certainly, no future Chief Executive will be foolish or vain enough to wire up his office for posterity, the way Mr. Nixon did.

Still, listen to this description of life in the White House:

"The White House does not provide an atmosphere in which idealism and devotion can flourish. Below the President is a mass of intrigue, posturing, strutting, and pious 'commitment' to irrelevant windbagery. It is designed as the perfect setting for the conspiracy of mediocrity—that all too frequently successful collection of the untalented, the unpassionate, and the insincere seeking to convince the public that it is brilliant, compassionate and dedicated."

That sounds much like the unflattering descriptions of the Nixon White House, but it was written five years ago by George E. Reedy, who served in Lyndon Johnson's White House. Reedy's prophetic book, "The Twilight of the Presidency," warned that presidential mythology had heaped more burdens

on the office than it can reasonably bear, that the presidency does not function as magically as the Camelot legends pretend.

Not many listened to him. There is such a strong disposition, not only in Washington but throughout the nation, to believe the President is more than one man. Michael Novak, in his new book, "Choosing Our King", calls him a priest, prophet and king, all in one.

"The President of the United States is no mere manager of an insurance firm," Novak wrote. "The way he lives affects our image of ourselves. His style and his tastes weigh upon our spirits. Eisenhower encouraged a "silent" generation, Kennedy an "activist" decade. Nixon at first made some feel solid and appreciative and others even in the beginning, heavy and ashamed."

The President as symbol. It was and is an important working element in Mr. Nixon's handling of the office. In a 1967 campaign memo, speech writer Ray Price advised Nixon:

"People identify with a President in a way they do with no other public figure. potential presidents are measured against an ideal that's a combination of leading man, God, father, hero, pope, king, with maybe just a touch of the Furies thrown in."

Price, as quoted in Novak's book, offered this ad-

vice for campaigning: "We have to be very clear on this point: that the response is to the image, not to the man, since 99 per cent of the voters have no contact with the man. It's not what's there that counts, it's what is projected..."

If that seems cynical, it is nothing more than practical advice. When the candidate becomes President, draped in the ermine of the highest office, the shadowy relationship between symbol and substance—between the projected President and the real one—becomes even more crucial.

"I just think he will do everything he can not to hurt the President," said H.R. (Bob) Haldeman at one point, talking about John Mitchell.

"Yeah," said Nixon, "That has got to be true of everybody because it isn't the man, it's the office."

That fine distinction runs through the discussions of these men in trouble, who were trying to deal with the finite criminal accusations and meanwhile defend their most valuable intangible, the symbolic presidency. Bob Haldeman and John Ehrlichman and Richard Nixon talked together with the easy bluntness of old law partners and many of their conversations were about a fourth entity—somebody called "The President."

"Dean, let's see, what the hell," said Nixon, "what's he

Utter Frailty of the President

got with regard to the President?"

And Nixon says: "No, no, no, I don't think Dean would go so far as to get into any conversation he had with the President. Even Dean, I don't think."

Haldeman agrees. It would be "un-American and anti-Nixon" if John Dean attacked the President.

For hours and hours, the three men wool-gathered about how this other personage, the President, would deal with Watergate. What would he say to the people? What symbolic action would he take to reassure them?

Mr. Nixon and his men devoted interminable skull sessions to manufacturing words for "The President" to utter, usually through his press secretary. News people do not like to admit it, but press coverage is devoted almost entirely to this symbolic President. They dote on his utterances and actions, they analyze his public words and phrases with the intensity of Talmudic scholars. They almost never see the real man—except for carefully staged glimpses.

It is easy enough to deplore the hypocrisy of this arrangement. But there is no easy escape from it. Americans, after all, seem to need a symbolic President. He is part of the mysterious glue that holds our diverse population together. Novak calls the office an important totem in America's civil religion. Anyway, as

Price pointed out, it is physically impossible for 200 million citizens to know the real man himself.

"The thing I get over and over and over again from just ordinary folks," said Ehrlichman.

"Right," said Nixon.

"Why doesn't the President, so and so and so and so?" said Ehrlichman.

Nixon: "Say something what he's done on it?"

"Yeah," said Ehrlichman, "so symbolically you've got to do something."

"That's right," said Nixon. "Do something so that I am out front on this every—. They don't think the President is involved but they don't think he is doing enough."

In that snatch of conversation, there may be a clue to what produced the presidential tragedy of Watergate. There are dozens of similar passages scattered through the 46 transcripts. They suggest that Mr. Nixon and his closest aides somehow got lost in the warp between their real machinations in private and the symbolic President whom they were maintaining outside for public consumption. They seemed confused by the two—as if they would be personally free of criminal jeopardy as long as the symbolic presidential actions were convincing.

Listen to Ehrlichman fantasize aloud on how the news magazines will report

one of their many scenarios for the Watergate mess:

"Events" moved swiftly last week after the President was presented with a report indicating, for the first time, that suspicion of John Mitchell and Jeb Magruder as ringleaders in the Watergate break-in were facts substantiated by considerable evidence.

The President then dispatched so and so to do this and that and maybe to see Mitchell or something of that kind and these efforts resulted in Mitchell going to the U.S. attorney's office on Monday morning at 9 o'clock, asking to testify before the grand jury.

Charges of cover-up by the White House were materially dispelled by the diligent efforts of the President and his aides in moving on evidence which came to their hands in the closing days of the previous week.

"I'd buy that," said Mr. Nixon, obviously enchanted by Ehrlichman's dream story.

It was, of course, pure fantasy. That positive account of a strong and moral President, acting to clean up a sordid mess, never appeared despite all their efforts to create it.

As the tarnish grew darker and darker, Mr. Nixon never abandoned the illusion that—regardless of all the dirty transactions inside the White House—the symbolic President could step out front and make

himself gleaming white once more.

In the final week of shambles, Mr. Nixon became preoccupied with creating the impression before the people that "the President" was on top of things, in command, astride the white horse. Preserving the symbol seemed more important to him and even to his two aides, than saving any of his associates or making a clean sweep of the whole mess.

"You know I am in charge of this thing," he told Henry Peterson from the Justice Department. "You are and I am. Above everything else. And I am following it every inch of the way and I don't want any question, that's of the fact that I am a way ahead of the game."

When he talked to his old friend, Secretary of State William P. Rogers, he expressed the same hope in more pathetic terms:

"A lot of people in the country, we may find, they feel the President is doing the best he can in the damn thing. If I had wanted to cover up, they probably think the President can cover up. If I wanted to, I sure haven't done it very well, have I?"

The President can do anything, all powerful and good. People believed that about the President. Richard Nixon believed that, not just about himself, but about that larger symbolic shell which he tried to fill. Now everyone knows it isn't true.