

A GREAT DEAL remains to be said about the strange and unsolicited gift of transcripts Mr. Nixon made to the nation last week. Both their substance as documents and their short-comings as admissible evidence for the purposes for which they were sought will doubtless figure prominently in the impeachment process now under way. And that is as it should be. There is much to be learned as well from these records of the President's conversations with his closest advisers about Mr. Nixon's truthfulness—or, more precisely, his lack of it—in dealing with the American people in a series of purportedly candid and straightforward public accountings over the last year and a half. To all this we will be returning soon. But for the moment it seems to us more important to understand the meaning of last week's exercise as a whole. And for this, as it happens, these transcripts of bygone conversations about how to handle earlier Watergate crises are at once valuable and instructive. In fact, one finds in the proposed maneuvers and stratagems under intense discussion between Mr. Nixon and his now fallen White House associates nothing less than the prototype for last week's performance.

Let us familiarize you with the jargon of these earlier operations that emanated from Mr. Nixon's office: "stroking," "stone-walling," "toughing it out," "confining the situation," "a theory of containment," "the limited let-it-all-hang-out," or as the President put the question to which all this seems to have been the answer, "How do you handle that PR-wise?" With these tools of the presidential trade in mind, we can now turn to the situation that confronted the President. He had a deadline of 10 a.m. Tuesday morning to comply with a subpoena from the House Judiciary Committee for tape recordings and other documentary evidence relating to 42 White House conversations. At White House insistence, the committee had made elaborate arrangements for keeping this material confidential and had pledged to do so. Indeed, the White House had been adamant on the point, arguing that if some of this material became public in an undisciplined way, without the judicial safeguards of formal impeachment proceedings, it could damage reputations and seriously prejudice the trials of Watergate defendants and the President's case as well.

So what did the President do? He gave the public an almost indigestible dose of material it hadn't asked for, and he refused to give the duly constituted investigatory body of Congress the material it had properly subpoenaed. He held back all original tapes. He gave the committee edited versions of some, declined to produce even edited versions of others, and provided edited transcripts of a few more they hadn't asked for. In addition, he offered no indication of what techniques had been employed in the editing and transcription of these tapes and sought to make it impossible for the committee to verify either the fidelity or the completeness of the transcripts he sent. The significance of this became quickly apparent when the House Committee Counsel, John Doar, revealed that the committee's so-

phisticated transcription facilities and techniques had been able to reproduce on one tape already in its possession (courtesy of the Watergate Grand Jury and Judge John Sirica) words or phrases which are "inaudible" or "unintelligible" in the version made public by the President. Moreover, the President let it be known that he would provide no further transcripts to the Judiciary Committee, even though those he furnished have only to do with the Watergate break-in and cover-up, and the committee is seeking tapes and other material related to many more charges involving the President, including specifically ITT and the milk deal. "Watergate is the name of the game," said the President's lawyer, James D. St. Clair.

So much for "stonewalling," "toughing it out," and "the limited let-it-all-hang-out." How about the program "PR-wise?" *Fantastic*, as they say on Madison Avenue, *dynamite*. Monday evening, the television cameras zoomed in on a mountainous stack of gold-embossed, leather-bound books, bearing the great seal of the President of the United States. It swung back to the President himself, who leaned forward ever-so-slightly, peering earnestly into the camera. He waved an arm toward the bound volumes and said to the watching audience "never before in the history of the presidency have records that are so private been made so public." Dutifully, throughout his address, the camera continued to switch back and forth from the President to the awesome stack of volumes of which he spoke. Not until the next day, when the Judiciary Committee received its copies, did it become evident that this five foot shelf, so to speak, of great conversations had been some kind of stage-prop or sight gag: in truth, the transcripts themselves are contained in a paper-bound volume roughly the size of a big-city phonebook. As to the "stroking," it was by nature less visible but by no means less carefully programmed. Individual legislators were importuned and orchestrated to a fare-thee-well, with a view to prearranging the most favorable possible construction on the President's announcement of his intent in this matter—which was in fact to be an elaborate method of defying the committee's request.

This brings us finally to "confining the situation" and/or the "theory of containment," which is serious business. For what the President is really doing here is once again to draw a line, with respect to the requests for evidentiary material from both the Judiciary Committee and the Special Prosecutor, and to seek that "once and for all" resolution of his troubles that is no longer in his power to obtain, if it ever was. That, in short, is the plain lesson of these transcripts: consistently, from the very beginning, President Nixon, who remains the one enduring figure in all the planning and calculating of how to manage his Watergate defenses, has miscalculated where he can draw the line and how much he can contain. There is more than enough of substance in these transcripts to suggest that he has miscalculated once again.