

Leave Nixon Staff Unsure

By Lou Cannon

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On the cubicle wall of one White House staff office there is a sign that parodies President Nixon's public optimism and his self-proclamation of coolness under fire. It says: "When the going gets tough, the going gets tough."

A week after Mr. Nixon abandoned his long-fought claim of Watergate confidentiality, the going has become tougher than ever in the confines of the White House and the adjoining Executive Office Building. Now, among the rank-and-file and top aides alike, there is growing and persistent doubt that Mr. Nixon will be able to survive as President.

"For the first time, I no longer think that the President is going to make it," one usually optimistic middle-level aide said yesterday. "The transcripts suggest he didn't know about the Watergate cover-up before March 21, but the other stuff may bring him down."

The "other stuff," in the opinion of this aide, are the conclusions emerging from the 1,254 pages of edited transcripts that President Nixon was simultaneously ineffective and offensive in his Watergate dealings.

The transcripts show the President, Bob Haldeman and John Ehrlichman discussing presumably trusted White House aides—and the options in the Watergate cover-up—in the rudest and crudest of terms. They also show that Mr. Nixon, who assembled the largest White House staff in history, apparently trusted no one outside the small circle of this presidential advisers.

"Nobody is a friend of ours," Mr. Nixon says during one conversation with John Dean. "Let's face it."

What the President is facing within the White House these days, as he travels around the country trying to convince Americans of his innocence, are the doubts of a once-loyal staff that now makes only the most formal defense of his conduct.

In an atmosphere where it was once considered disloyal to make even the mildest

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jokes about Mr. Nixon in the presence of outsiders, the self-denunciations of the transcripts have become staples of ridicule.

Even the public statements from the White House, while exuding the official optimism that Mr. Nixon will now be able to withstand impeachment, show deep concern about the reaction to the transcripts.

White House special assistant Patrick J. Buchanan candidly says that there has been "a mixed reaction" to the transcripts.

"Some people feel that the transcripts show that the President was not leading a criminal conspiracy to cover up the Watergate affair," Buchanan said. "The downside is that, as the President said, this is raw conversation, very raw, and that's disadvantageous."

The highest-ranking presidential aide, chief of staff Alexander M. Haig Jr., was basically optimistic about the reaction to the President's decision to release the transcripts. But Haig, too, acknowledged that there had been mixed reactions to the decision.

"I think basically most of the people I've talked to are relieved that the President has done it," Haig said. "The most disadvantageous thing we've had to cope with is the feeling that we were hiding something. We recognize that there are some grievous embarrassments in the transcripts, but we think it's clear that there are no impeachable offenses in there."

White House press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler acknowledged in his briefing yesterday that the White House had received critical letters about the President's language, much of which is reduced to "expletive deleted" in the transcripts. In defense he said that the participants in the conversations had not expected them to become public.

But it is not deleted expletives that have harmed President Nixon with his own loyalists. Rather, it is the revelation that Mr. Nixon appears to think very little of those who work for him—or of anyone else. Consistently the transcripts reveal passages in which Mr. Nixon, Bob Haldeman or John Ehrlichman expresses doubts about the wisdom, capability or unswerving loyalty of aides who were

considered for unsavory political missions.

It is a measure of the deteriorating loyalty in the White House—and of the impact of the transcripts—that aides who are the objects of opprobrium in these conversations have gained in esteem.

One former aide who has been so favored by the revelations of the transcripts is recently departed counselor Bryce Harlow, whose name came up in a Sept. 15, 1972, conversation in which Dean was blaming House Speaker Carl Albert for a Government Accounting Office audit of White House political funds.

"Well [expletive deleted] the speaker of the House," said Haldeman. "Maybe we better put a little heat on him."

The President promptly agreed with Haldeman's suggestion to confront Albert and say, "I regret . . . your calling the GAO down here because of what it is going to cause us to do to you."

"Why don't you see if Harlow will tell him that?" the President suggested.

"Because he wouldn't do it—he would just be pleasant and call him Mr. Speaker," Haldeman replied.

It is conversations such as these and Mr. Nixon's brutal judgments of such former aides as L. Patrick Gray ("a little stupid") and such present ones as Leonard Garment ("Len is the panic-button type") that have distressed many who have worked long and hard for the President.

By and large, the staff is willing to accept the formal White House defense that Mr. Nixon did not commit an impeachable offense in the Watergate cover-up. But there is growing concern that he will not be able to withstand public pressure for his removal once the full import of the transcripts becomes known.

The first reaction to the President's change in course last week when he decided to release the edited transcripts was overwhelmingly positive. The reaction to Mr. Nixon's speech of April 29 announcing his decision was also positive, and this continued the next day when a summary highly favorable to the President was released.

But the release of the transcripts and the focus of many news stories on Mr. Nixon's long discussions of "rush money" for the Water-

gate defendants dissipated most of the early optimism. By the end of last week White House aides were, in many cases, no longer confident that Mr. Nixon had made the right decision when he decided to release the transcripts.

"I don't know whether what he did was impeachable, said one aide yesterday. "I just know it looks bad as hell." Then he grinned and added: "I mean bad as expletive deleted."

On the positive side, for President Nixon, there is a certain feeling within the White House that he is now more free than before to concentrate on other issues because of his decision. One aide said that he believed that the "mystery which clung to the tapes" had fueled the impeachment demands, and this had now been largely removed by release of the transcripts.

Another senior aide gave this evaluation: "He's better off than before he did this, difficult as it is. It is not a happy picture and the results are almost entirely unpleasant. Now it is all out and the nature of the material explains why it was so long withheld."

This aide then expressed what has become the latest and perhaps last White House hope—that the American people will judge the documents in their "totality" and not "just the ransom demand of March 21 and that it will not all hang on the failure to take immediate action."

But there are others in the White House who are not convinced that this "totality" will exonerate the President.

"It may make it harder, in a very literal sense, for the House to vote impeachment, but they're likely to vote impeachment anyway," said one aide. "And the transcripts may make it easier for the American people to accept that decision."

It is the uncertainty of how the American people will read the transcripts, if they do, that now torments will read the transcripts, if they do that now torments the White House, where much of the pride has gone out of working for the President.

"The smoke hasn't cleared on this one," says Buchanan in a judgment widely shared in the White House.

When it does clear, some of the once-optimistic loyalists are beginning to believe, Richard Nixon may no longer be President.