

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The Imaginary Men

In our first comments on the presidential tapes we remarked that it helps to separate two questions: The general propriety of the conversations, and evidence of impeachable offenses. We have tended to emphasize the latter, and will return to it shortly. But today we would like to lay aside impeachment and other legal issues, and simply address what the conversations tell us about Richard Nixon, his administration and American politics.

This is of course what the rest of the press and the nation at large have been discussing all along, and we should perhaps apologize for the quirk of mind that led us to believe the question on the table was whether to impeach the President. In any event, having said so many times over the last year that even without a case for impeachment Watergate will have done enormous harm to the American Republic, we can scarcely disagree with the widespread conclusion that the tapes reveal a flawed mentality.

If the case for criminal complicity does fail, for that matter, it will be only on the narrowest of grounds. The President's attorney will be arguing: Yes the President talked about paying blackmail, yes his words say several times he thought paying the money was the only immediate answer; yes someone might construe that as approval, but no that isn't what he meant, and no his words were not directly connected to the actual payoffs. Even if all this is true, what a defense for a President of the United States to offer.

More broadly, the tapes reveal a whole litany of presidential failings: A casual attitude toward lawbreaking by his subordinates. In particular a casual attitude toward perjury, indeed remarks that some lawyers construe as subornation of perjury. A reach for public deception, in particular a willingness to invoke national security and executive privilege for expedient reasons. A disinclination to probe and question his top subordinates on such questions as moving about large monies or "deep sixing" documents. And above all, a general disposition to concentrate almost entirely on the question, what can we get away with? at the expense of the question, what would be right?

Some things can of course be said in exoneration. The President apparently didn't know much before March 21, and part of his reaction was perhaps confusion. The President is not a district attorney, and at least up to a point is entitled to assume that prosecutors will do their job without his help on each fact. There are points, as in sending a

message to John Mitchell not to refuse testimony to protect the President, at which he shows a concern with getting the story to law enforcement authorities.

Yet even on a sympathetic reading, the record must be that faced with a mounting crisis, Mr. Nixon reacted deplorably. He was willing to consider patently wrong courses of action. He was willing to trip along, and even conceivably over, the line of outright illegality. He coupled any moves to expose crimes with moves to limit and contain the exposures. And finally, he chose and protected all of the aides whose personalities are so brutally revealed in these conversations.

A preoccupation with image rather than reality, it seems to us, is the characteristic that runs through both the conversations and the faults they reveal. In conversation after conversation, it becomes impossible to tell whether the participants are trying to recall events or concoct a story. One gets the feeling they did not distinguish between the two in their own minds, that to them there was no reality, only the image they could paint.

And always there was a concern not with the meaning of events but with their "PR." When in a conversation with Assistant Attorney General Henry Petersen it became apparent that eventually Mr. Halde- man and Mr. Ehrlichman would have to go, the questions on the President's mind were: Can one go without the other? Should it be before the Magruder testimony or after? Should it be before Dean goes or after?

We come back to a point we have made many times: The inhospitality of the Nixon White House to men of vision, intellect or stature. It is quite impossible to imagine these conversations going on as they did if they had included, to pick two men no longer in the White House at the time, Arthur Burns or Daniel P. Moynihan. To understand why such men were so few there, observe that Leonard Garment, who did see the extent of the danger the moment he learned of it, was treated as an object of faint ridicule.

This is ultimately the President's doing and the President's failing. He has accomplished much and promised more, but he filled his inner world with imaginary men. Empty men committed the type of blunder you would expect of them, and the President himself proved too empty to limit the damage. For this he has paid with his reputation and may yet pay with his job, and to the office and nation he sought to protect and restore, his legacy is further grief and further cynicism.