

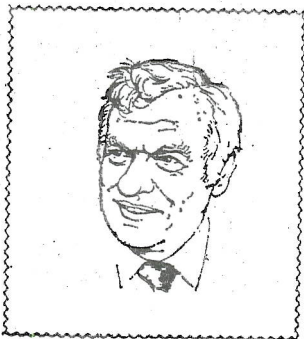
Charles McCabe

Himself

'Unintelligible'

THERE I AM, like millions of interested American citizens, slogging my way through the extraordinary farrago known as The Tapes, Maybe. This was recently put out by the Government Printing Office in aid of what Terry O'Flaherty has called "Richard Nixon's popular television series, 'I Am Not A Crook.'"

I am up to my elbows in the White House-edited transcript of a pivotal April 15, 1973 conversation in the Oval Office between Mr. Nixon and his former domestic grey eminence, John Ehrlichman. The 40-minute conversation started at 10:35 a.m. and lasted until 11:15 a.m.



Of a sudden it dawned on me there was something a little funny about the Nixon-Ehrlichman exchange. Mr. Ehrlichman, who bore the brunt of the dialogue, seemed to speak perfect English. The President, though he is noted from Whittier, Calif. to Vladivostok for his considerable forensic talents, didn't talk the Mother Lingo so good that morning.

★ ★ ★

THIS WAS RIGHT funny because a few nights earlier I had heard his pearly vowels, clipped consonants, and rounded periods. They sounded better than ever. I had thought that was merely the snake oil salesman in Mr. Nixon, which becomes more cogent, more persuasive, and more generally telling as his pitch moves beyond belief.

That presentation had been called brilliant, and it certainly was. There was certainly nothing incoherent about its delivery, though there was much

about its content. There was certainly nothing unintelligible about its confident utterance, though there was little of sense, in the historical context of the Watergate matter. Even its reason for delivery made little sense, since the speech has backfired resoundingly.

Yet this clear, coherent, confident fellow was judged to be "unintelligible" no less than 18 times in his dialogue with Mr. Ehrlichman. Whoever edited the tapes only once found the aide unintelligible, though Ehrlichman did lean rather heavily on such sturdy locutions as "... well," "Mmhuh-mmhuh," and "Yeah."

★ ★ ★

IT HAS BEEN argued by the White House, in times past, that the eavesdropping system which Mr. Nixon installed in the White House was of defective quality. It seemed to be unable adequately to pick up remarks that incriminated Mr. Nixon personally.

On April 15, the system was particularly selective. It was not only that Mr. Nixon was judged to be unintelligible 18 times, and Mr. Ehrlichman but once; but the times when Mr. Nixon could not be heard clearly were nearly always the times when my indecent curiosity was on its hind legs.

After Mr. Nixon both says and asks that Jeb Magruder "talks pretty much, doesn't he?" and Mr. Ehrlichman retorts with a sagacious "Mmhuh," Mr. Nixon is suddenly rendered "unintelligible" in the next part of the dialogue.

★ ★ ★

IN FACT four entire responses were judged "unintelligible" by the White House editors, including one involving a fascinating meeting between CBS newsman Dan Schorr and John Mitchell on a Washington-New York train. I grieve that Mr. Nixon was unintelligible on that one.

May I repeat a story I used in my column written over a year ago called Did Nixon Know? It told of a man who came up to the redoubtable first Duke of Wellington and asked if he were Mr. Jones.

"If you can believe that," said the Duke, "you can believe anything." I added, then, "... if you believe Richard Nixon did not have prior and current knowledge of the monkey business at Watergate, you can believe anything."