

'A Cancer of the Spirit'

The following is Eric Sevareid's commentary from the CBS Evening News of May 1, 1974.

It was said long ago by one of the Greeks—"A man's character is his fate."

For many months President Nixon has been throwing carefully carved pieces of meat to the prosecutorial wolf pack; now, at the eleventh hour, he has thrown out himself, one of his two selves. He has given them the private Nixon in an effort to save the public Nixon.

But the public Nixon as presented in his public speeches—past or future—cannot be understood unless the private Nixon is understood. The means is now available for everyone who will take the trouble to read deeply in the 1300 page transcript of the presidential conversations.

All questions of legal incrimination laid aside—those are for Congress and courts to decide, not the press—these pages constitute a moral indictment without known precedent in the story of American government. There is no talk in these endless conversations about the welfare of the American people, their faith in their leaders, the nation's reputation in the world, no awareness of what Jefferson was talking about when he invoked "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind."

There are minimal references to truth; but innumerable conjectures about the most saleable publicity techniques for defending themselves.

These are men whose minds are irrevocably fixed in the "we or they" view of life and politics; men holding the supreme power in the land, talking like besieged conspirators, men unforgetting, unforgiving, constantly calculating how they can "get" their opponents and critics.

They are not interested in destroying their opponent's arguments; but in destroying their opponents, personally. Mr. Nixon himself talks of using FBI and other agencies to do this. From these pages rises the rancid odor of hatred.

John Dean warns the President that a "cancer" is eating at the White House—meaning the Watergate scandals. But all the time a more deadly cancer was eating at the spirit, the social ethic upon which the Constitution itself is based, in the absence of which it would dissolve.

At a minimum that social ethic encompasses reverence for the law, respect for institutions, the assumption that one's political opponents are honorable men, and a view of the people as the ultimate authority, not as pawns in a power game.

It is a hard thing to say, but perhaps Mr. Nixon is banking, not on the people's fairness but upon their cynicism. The other night, Spiro Agnew, an admitted felon, received a standing ovation in a theater.

If something serious has indeed happened to our values and standards, we should soon know, as the impact of Mr. Nixon's documents sinks in—or fails to sink in.