



A Deeply Moral Country

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THE STORM RAISED by publication of the White House transcripts demonstrates a point much forgotten late and soon. The United States remains a deeply moral country.

It has been easy enough over the past few years not to equate America with the New Jerusalem. The swag has been piled as high as the Rockies, and the self-debauchery of getting and spending has gone on apace. Great power rivalry has bred a casual acceptance of the doctrine that might makes right. Frustration in race relations has fostered a tolerance for unfair and even brutal practice.

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DEEP CYNICISM became the badge of the young. Five-year-olds learned not to be taken in by TV commercials. In Washington particularly, it was assumed that men would lie and cheat and steal to stay in power.

It is not surprising, accordingly, that the White House staff said that the transcripts reflected "life as it is . . . in politics and business and industry." Nor that the Rev. John McLaughlin of the White House staff would assert that criticism smacked of hypocrisy.

In fact, what looked like moral inertia in the country was only a refusal to accept idealistic nostrums for complicated economic, international and racial problems. Beneath that unfounded caution, the Puritan conscience ran strong. The country was not blind to lies and cheating and

browbeating and corruption, and nothing has showed it better than the character of the criticisms made by the President's supporters.

Thus, Hugh Scott, the Republican leader in the Senate, spoke of a "disgusting and immoral performance." John Anderson, the leader of the Republican conference in the House, said the transcripts showed the President to be "totally lacking in moral sensitivity."

But if an absence of moral outrage would have been despicable, mere indignation does not lead very far. There is a vital difference, as House Republican leader John Rhodes has made plain, between low behavior and evidence of impeachable actions. On the latter issue, the case is by no means buttoned up.

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THE TRANSCRIPTS themselves add hardly anything. They show that the President did seem to coach his subordinates in perjury; that he refused to grant immunity in order to prevent the truth from coming out; that he seemed to approve a report that money was paid to the Watergate defendants to keep quiet.

But all of that was implicit in the Ervin committee hearings, and the indictments obtained by the special prosecutor. That so much is being made of the transcripts now suggests to me that the country and the Congress have not truly paid serious attention to the details of the Watergate case.