

'Peace at the Center'

By James Reston

WASHINGTON

WASHINGTON, July 18—Over the last few months not only President Nixon's supporters but his critics have expressed admiration for his endurance, and wondered how he was able to keep going in the face of the evidence against his Administration.

Now, in a long interview with Rabbi Baruch M. Korff, we have his own explanation, and it is an astonishing story, for he still seems to see himself not as a central figure in a political conspiracy against his political opponents but as the innocent victim of a conspiracy directed at him by others.

He expressed the view to Rabbi Korff that the Watergate scandal would probably be regarded by historians as less serious and important than the Teapot Dome scandal of the twenties. History would probably assess Watergate as a scandal, he said, but as "the broadest and thinnest scandal in American history, because what was it about?"

He dismissed the conviction of John Ehrlichman for conspiracy and perjury with the thought that it was "extremely difficult" for any Watergate figure to get a fair trial in the District of Columbia.

He blamed all the publicity about this case on the ideological bias of reporters who opposed his policies and remarked that "if I were a liberal, Watergate would be a blip."

On two points he did indulge in some self-criticism: He was so busy trying to end the Vietnam war in 1972 that he didn't pay any attention to the campaign. And "maybe" he should have acted quicker in getting to the bottom of the scandal.

Otherwise, you can search this self-revealing interview for any suggestion that the people who want the President impeached do so simply because they believe that the evidence justifies impeachment. In discussing the "tone" of his taped White House conversations, Mr. Nixon says you wouldn't like the tone of the conversations of other Presidents he has known. In explaining the opposition of some Republican Congressmen, he says some of them "are concerned about the outcome of their own elections this November and feel that if the President were to resign, that their chances would be better . . ."

It is interesting that this interview, which took place last May 13, was released over two months later, just before the Judiciary Committee was drafting the articles of impeachment for debate. And even more interesting that Mr. Nixon apparently regarded it as an accurate and effective defense of his conduct.

In supporting his principal White House aides of the past, most of whom

have either been indicted or are awaiting trial or are in jail, he makes much of "compassion" for the accused but does not mention compassion for the people who were burgled or bugged by his agents.

"But I guess," he says, "compassion in a President is not considered to be a virtue anymore, particularly when it does involve men who were close to him in developing policies that were basically conservative."

This is the President's major and recurring theme: That his troubles were caused by people who opposed his policies, though the overwhelming majority of the papers and commentators applauded the policies he prizes the most—his opening to China, his détente with the Soviet Union, his cease-fire in the Middle East, and at home, his efforts to reform the welfare system and his experiment with revenue sharing.

If there were evidence that the President had learned the lessons of these tragic years, the situation here would be less gloomy than it is. But here is the President defending everything, admitting nothing of any importance and insisting that this mentality is essential to the peace of the world.

"A resignation or impeachment of the President of the United States would, in my view, have devastating consequences in terms of our foreign policy, would jeopardize the best hope we have to build a structure of peace in the world, the best hope we have had in this century, or perhaps in two centuries, and also would have a very detrimental effect on our political system for years to come due to the fact that it would weaken the Presidency."

This is his explanation of his ability to withstand the torrent of criticism: It is not fair, it is directed by biased journalists and political opponents, but he can stand it and will fight it to the end because he has a strong inheritance, a strong family and a good supporting staff.

"In more personal terms," he observed, "it gets down to what the Quakers call 'peace at the center.' . . . The most important factor is that the individual must know, deep inside, that he is right. . . ."

Maybe a man in such trouble has to believe that he is right to keep going—we'll leave that to the psychiatrists—but this is finding "peace at the center" through illusion, and the illusions of the past—about himself, about his staff and about his "enemies"—are what have brought him now to his greatest personal crisis.