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The 'Repellent Tapes': Will They

Part 5/3/74

Sheer flesh-crawling repulsion is the natural reaction of any American who has spent hour upon hour reading the newly released White House tape transcripts. A common sensible man who performs this chore can easily see why the President fought so hard against the tapes release—quite without regard to any question of his own guilt or innocence.

The moral atmosphere the tapes reveal is that of the worst kind of old-fashioned, stop-at-nothing courthouse gang—but this pre-Watergate White House gang mainly pursued cold, hard power and sought to preserve that power. As H. R. Haldeman boasted at one point on that famous day, March 21, 1973, they were not in it for the money—which would have been more humanly understandable.

As for the prevailing style of this pre-Watergate White House, it is not easy to convey. The backroom of a second rate advertising agency in a suburb of Hell, probably gives you the best idea. All in all, saying that the released tapes are repellent is putting it rather mildly. But that only makes it more important to bear in mind a few basic truths, as follows:

- Being repellent is not an impeachable offense—even in the presidency.
- Giving serious thought to committing a crime is not an impeachable offense, provided that the crime is then decided against. If politicians were regularly impeached for giving thought to crime without committing it, we should have had no Presidents at all with the possible exceptions of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln.
- It is not even an impeachable offense for a President to choose as his principal subordinates a bizarre, too narrowly experienced, arrogantly power-hungry, endlessly sleazy set of brown-nosers, several of whom also committed crimes.
- In fact, it is *knowledge* of crimes committed in his behalf, and consequent participation in those same crimes, that makes a President properly impeachable.

The third item on the foregoing list is certainly arguable. But wrong choice of subordinates was in fact the main charge against President Andrew Johnson; and that was a bad precedent. If you also consider the history of the presidency in this century—let alone from the beginning—you will find wrong choice of subordinates a common presidential error, although never on quite the level achieved by Richard M. Nixon.

So the real question is not whether

Help Mr. Nixon?



By James K. W. Atherton—The Washington Post

"The real question is whether the President knowingly participated in criminal acts."

the President is a nice man; or whether he thought about breaking the law and might even have done so, if he had seen his way safely; or whether his strange ways of doing business formerly populated the White House with bottom-dwelling slugs like John W. Dean III—who emerges from the tapes and record as the most totally repellent figure of the whole lot.

The real question is whether the President knowingly participated in criminal acts. Given the behavior of John Dean and so many of the others, it is an immensely complex question. Given the circumstances until March 21, 1973, a cover-up from the President, to protect staff-members from discipline for their follies, was just as possible as

a cover-up for the President. And even a cover-up for the President could well have been undertaken without the President's knowledge.

Given these questions' complexity, and all that hinges upon them, too, this city's cancerously ingrown political community would do well, for once, to avoid the system of the mouse's tale in "Alice." This is no time for anything like: "I'll be judge, I'll be jury, said cunning old Fury." The House Judiciary Committee now has a volume of data that will need much time to digest. And after the Judiciary Committee, must come the House itself, and maybe the Senate.

Meanwhile, two things of interest are revealed by quick checks made in

key places in the House, in the intervals of horrified reading of the tapes. The average House member is not quite so repelled as the average man-in-the-street is likely to be — probably because average politicians know a lot about courthouse gangs, are often a bit tempted by crime, and do not care much for personal style.

Second, the rules set forth in the four items listed above are generally accepted in the House, except by the extreme leftwing. So in the end, it may be that these repellent tapes will help President Nixon more than they hurt him, at least in his fight for survival if not "image-wise," as John W. Dean III would no doubt put it.

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