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# Tapes Repellent, But May Aid Nixon

**Joseph Alsop**

**S**HEER flesh-crawling repulsion is the natural reaction of any American who has spent hour upon hour reading the newly released transcripts of the White House tapes. 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 Robert 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.

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**A**S 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:

**ITEM:** Being repellent is not an impeachable offense — even in the presidency.

**ITEM:** 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.

**ITEM:** 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 subordinates, several of whom also committed crimes.

**ITEM:** In fact it is knowledge of crimes committed in his behalf, and consequent participation in those same crimes, that makes a President properly impeachable.

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**T**HE 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 President Nixon.

So the real question is not whether 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.

The real question is whether the President knowingly participated in criminal acts. It may be that these repellent tapes will help Mr. Nixon more than they hurt him.