

# Alice in Wonderland

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, Nov. 18—In his Florida press conference last night President Nixon conveyed the impression of a man frustrated in his efforts to publish the facts of Watergate. "I wanted the evidence out," he said, expressing his "very great disappointment" at the non-existence of two tapes.

For just a moment one might have forgot that for months this same man had struggled to keep the tapes and other evidence from the special prosecutor, the Senate, the public. He had claimed an absolute privilege to keep information secret, indeed an absolute immunity from legal process; his lawyers had argued that anything less would threaten "the continued existence of the Presidency as a functioning institution."

The press conference was extraordinarily, if unintentionally, revealing. Mr. Nixon's truthfulness in denying knowledge of crimes has been a large question in Watergate. On those specifics we do not yet have definitive evidence. But the press conference sketched something broadly relevant: His general attitude toward truth.

Three weeks earlier, answering the first question at his previous press conference, Mr. Nixon had misstated the case of Aaron Burr as a precedent for Presidential privilege. He wrongly said that Jefferson had offered "a summary" of a disputed letter, as Mr. Nixon tried to do in the tapes case. In fact Jefferson's attorney offered to let the court or Burr's lawyers see the whole letter and copy the relevant portions.

That mistake drew public comment: it was known to Mr. Nixon's lawyers. Yet now, before the editors in Florida, he repeated and embellished the error.

## ABROAD AT HOME

He spoke of "the Jefferson rule." He said falsely again that Jefferson turned over "a summary." He even invented a subsequent judicial decision: "Then Marshall sitting as Chief Justice ruled for the President." There was no such ruling.

Asked about his own taxes, Mr. Nixon acknowledged that he had paid "nominal" sums in 1970 and 1971. That was perfectly proper, he said, because he had taken deductions for giving his official papers to the archives as President Johnson had. But he avoided the legal question that has been raised—whether he made a real gift of the papers in the way and in the time required by law.

On the subject of campaign contributions, Mr. Nixon said that both parties had tainted money in 1972: "Some of that . . . came from corporate sources and was illegal because the law had been changed and apparently people didn't know it." But there has been no suggestion of any Democratic party equivalent of the massive effort by Mr. Nixon's fundraisers to extort contributions from corporations. And that law has not "changed" recently; the Corrupt Practices Act has prohibited corporate political contributions for decades.

Mr. Nixon himself brought up the milk industry's campaign contributions. He denied that he had raised support prices in return for the money; he did so only because Congress was pressing for higher prices and had "put a gun to our head." This President has not so meekly retreated before other Congressional ideas costing money.

In any event, the question being investigated is a different one. It is whether he or his aides in seeking campaign money from the milkmen indicated that prices would then go up—whether or not he had really decided on a raise for other reasons. That approach would be a crime. The best evidence is in the President's files and in his tape of a meeting with the milk representatives in his office. In both civil and criminal proceedings Mr. Nixon has doggedly refused that evidence.

In the week before the latest press conference, Mr. Nixon met with groups from Congress to argue his case. There again his handling of the truth was revealing—especially in the direct attacks on Elliot Richardson and Archibald Cox, the dismissed special prosecutor.

According to a Republican Congressman who took notes, Charles Whalen of Ohio, the President said Mr. Cox changed his mind about the proposed tapes compromise "on Friday night," October 19. But published documents make clear to all the world that Mr. Cox had resisted all along the crucial Presidential demand—that he refrain from seeking further Presidential evidence. He reiterated that position formally in a letter delivered to the White House counsel on Friday morning, October 19.

Why should Richard Nixon deal so cavalierly with the facts? The question goes to mysteries of character that no outsider can hope to fathom. In misrepresenting, in evading, in distracting, he could be acting deliberately. Or he could have made the necessary adjustments in his subconscious and not be aware of the difference between truth and falsehood in these matters.

The President's techniques, whatever their cause, raise an urgent national question: Will the public be dazzled by voluble explanations that do not really explain? Will it be too weary to follow the words to their real meaning? Or will it have the patience and determination to keep probing for the truth?

It is never easy to resist the force of deceptive words; Joe McCarthy taught us that. But the price of surrender is too high.