

## Failings of "Somebody Very Close"

There are those who claim that the fictional 007 became a worldwide glandular and intelligence hero because John Kennedy said that he was a James Bond fan.

It is established history that after Lyndon Johnson had the Fort Worth barbecue wizard Walter Jetton at the White House, Jetton's vans, filled with succulent ribs, were summoned by hostesses all across the land.

When Richard Nixon pinned a flag in his lapel and became the spirit of '76, lapel flags blossomed in board rooms and Rotarian halls. After the story got out that Nixon had seen *Patton* at least three times, the motion picture's gate went up an estimated 20%.

One of the immense powers of the presidency is the power of personal suggestion and example. In fact, television has so greatly magnified the human elements of Presidents that this may be as important to White House leadership as the constitutional authority of the office. For better or worse, television has made the President "somebody very close" to most American citizens, says Pollster Daniel Yankelovich, and while their own feelings of inadequacy and humility keep them from making instant judgments about complicated issues like milk price supports and the Middle East oil tangle, Americans seize on the personal actions that they can see in their living rooms and can understand. History may prove that Nixon's worst failure is the sequence of seemingly minor personal absurdities that he indulged in.

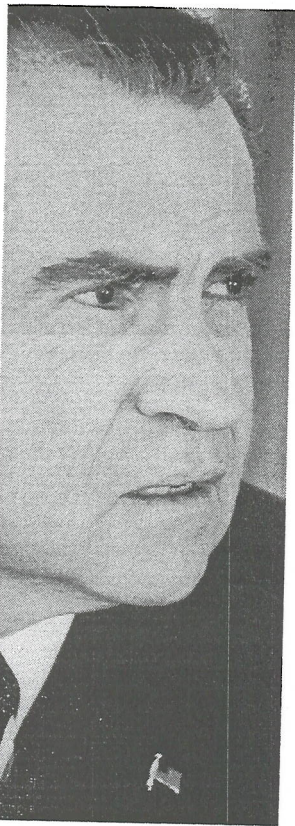
Resentment of the President's inconsistencies is now deep in the American soul. Nixon preached law-and-order but presided over a lawless administration. While he was cutting programs of education and health and urging personal spending restraint on everyone else, his private homes were being voluptuously appointed at taxpayers' expense. His calls for all Americans to carry the national commitments were still ringing when it was learned Nixon had used gimmicks to reduce his taxes to a pittance. And even as he belatedly began to recognize the seriousness of the energy crisis, he roared round the country in his huge jet and churned up and down the Potomac valley in his big helicopters.

While Nixon has decried distortions in the press, his own arguments have been accented with inaccurate historical allusions and downright misstatements that he has never bothered to correct. Cropping up now as a public worry in the opinion samplings is another of those "petty" episodes that the men in the White House swat as if they were mere flies. Nixon went into a meeting with 16 Governors and told them he knew of no other Watergate developments that would embarrass them. The next day it was revealed that one of the tapes had a more than 18-minute gap and Nixon had known about it. The man who is "somebody very close" had deceived not just 16 Governors but also millions and millions of his people.

The grimly comic sequence of how the long buzz got in the tape is now registering on the public mind. A vast number of Americans know a good deal about tape recorders, and they can follow the electronic saga. The final fragments of credibility in the tapes were shattered in many minds.

One can predict with some confidence that yet more disapproval of Nixon will come out of the White House's cannibalism. Not only have Nixon and his few confidants turned a cold shoulder on many of the young presidential aides caught in Watergate, but they have also tried to smear the reputation of former Attorney General Elliot Richardson and are now discrediting White House Counsel Fred Buzhardt. If Buzhardt devised the ludicrous Watergate legal strategy, he deserves criticism. But publicly humiliating a loyalist like Buzhardt is another of those small human rituals that most people comprehend.

What stands now between Nixon and impeachment, suggest some of the opinion diagnosticians, is a thin tissue of personal well-being felt by most Americans. They still have it pretty good, and they don't want a change. But if too many of them lose their jobs or their mobility or their heat, then their fear and disillusion may be turned with even greater force on the man they see so often in their living rooms, who has disappointed them in so many personal ways.



PRESIDENT NIXON