

By Clement E. Vose

MIDDLETOWN, Conn.—It is unprecedented and unbelievable that Richard M. Nixon's papers donated to the National Archives were appraised as a charitable gift valued at \$576,000.

The test of the worth of such papers is their value for researchers, whom any repository, public or private, is dedicated to serve. But the four key parties in an appraisal are the donor, the appraiser, the Internal Revenue Service, and the recipient institution. The scholar is not usually consulted about value. Certainly no other Vice-Presidential papers have come close to the excessive Nixon valuation.

Comparisons would be plentiful were it not that I.R.S. records are sealed, the archival libraries and manuscript collections of the world run in confidence, the individual donor largely quiet, and the professional appraisers necessarily secretive. Until one of the participants in these transactions involving office files of politicians, playwrights, academicians and others tells accurately and regularly what is going on, it will be impossible for the public to judge a practice that Mr. Nixon has made perfect.

When hard cash is paid for manuscripts, as it is on occasion, we get some sense of comparison. Bertrand Russell was not a Vice President of the United States for eight years, but for nearly 10 times longer was a creative genius, a correspondent of the world's great philosophers, mathematicians, political radicals; and near the end of his days his lifetime papers were sold for cash. The purchase for McMaster College in Hamilton, Ontario, for \$480,000 was made possible by donations from Cyrus S. Eaton, the Atkinson Foundation of Toronto and the Canadian Government.

W. E. B. Du Bois, the remarkable

scholar, polemicist and spokesman for American blacks, left a heritage of papers that also covered the years from the eighteen-nineties to the nineteen-sixties. As with Mr. Russell, there has been a growing scholarly interest in his life and influence, and the availability of his papers is certain to increase this interest enormously. Yet the University of Massachusetts outbid all rivals for this magnificent collection when it agreed to pay his widow for all of them the sum of \$150,000.

When a commercial transaction occurs, as in the sale of the Russell and Du Bois papers, the amount paid establishes a basis for figuring taxes. Even here one would look for the intrusion of sentiment—Mr. Russell was Mr. Eaton's friend and McMaster was Mr. Eaton's alma mater—since a political patron might feign an offer to purchase the papers of a public figure like Mr. Nixon. While there would be a need for sophisticated examination, it would be pertinent in such cases to know the number and amounts of serious competitive bids.

My simple proposition is that no private library in the world in 1968 or 1969 would have paid \$576,000 for the Nixon papers. Few could have; none would have.

The Library of Congress appraises the value of papers donated to its division of manuscripts. This collection, perhaps the richest of all, includes the papers of 24 Presidents, of scores of Congressmen, and judges, and the papers of hundreds of recognizably significant figures such as Booker T. Washington, Robert M. LaFollette and Carrie Chapman Catt. It is doubtful that any single set of these—many of breathtaking significance—have ever been judged to have a value for tax purposes of more than \$100,000, and that would be rare.

Such papers are invaluable to schol-

ars; it would be interesting and instructive to learn the value of particular papers to them. To make fair determinations would take years because famous figures so often leave little of interest behind them while persons of ordinary reputation may keep diaries and engage in correspondence of consuming interest. Now that Mr. Nixon has become a man of history there is no question but that scholars have an interest in poring over his life's papers.

For scholars of modern politics the interest is in what was said, and a photographic or microfilmed copy of papers is an acceptable substitute for the originals. This has led some repositories to judge the value of papers donated to them coldly in terms of reproduction cost. Such a judgment should have been made of the Nixon papers and, indeed, might still be done. This might push the value down to the bare minimum, although ten cents a page is the current amount used by practitioners of this appraisal method.

Many papers are donated outright. Their creators give no thought to possible tax benefits. President Nixon might have set such an example of generosity.

Clement E. Vose, professor of government at Wesleyan University, is a member of the National Archive Advisory Council.