

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The President's Offer

By any standard other than humiliating capitulation, the President's offer toward resolving the problem of access to Watergate evidence must be described as generous. Indeed, if the Rodino committee responds in the same spirit, it's possible for the first time in many months to conceive of the Watergate scandal actually coming to a conclusion.

In releasing a mountain of edited transcripts of White House tapes and inviting Congressmen Rodino and Hutchinson to verify their authenticity, the President obviously stopped short of full compliance with the committee's subpoena. But at the same time, it is a wholly unprecedented disclosure. More to the point, it ought to be a huge step toward resolving the question of the President's possible complicity in the Watergate cover-up. If the President is in fact deeply implicated, it's difficult to believe that strong evidence of that fact will fail to appear in so massive a disclosure.

It will of course take time to pore over the 1,308 pages of transcripts. A White House summary puts the defense's construction on the documents. Even it has its tough moments for the President, notably his September 15 remark to John Dean about being "very skillful putting your fingers in leaks that have sprung here and sprung there." But it also has highly persuasive moments, in particular in describing the President's efforts to get out the full facts after the key March 21 meeting with Mr. Dean.

Over the next few days, as the President's critics have time to digest the actual documents, we will also hear the prosecution's construction of the same events. Already the critics are finding segments to support their arguments. When the dust settles, the nation should have a far clearer picture of the whole Watergate episode.

The immediate question is how the Rodino committee should respond to the President's initiative. The committee canceled a meeting scheduled yesterday, and will obviously require some time to test the public reaction and explore ways to reach a consensus among its own members.

There are real problems for the

committee to ponder. Especially in light of the notorious 18-minute gap, the question of the integrity of the tapes obviously cannot be easily put aside. (Though it is one thing to cause one gap and quite another to doctor 200,000 words.) But the way to test this is the obvious one, for Mr. Rodino and Mr. Hutchinson to go listen to the tapes and report any mysterious buzzes and whistles. Significantly, the President did not say this offer was the last time he would respond to the committee's questions; indeed, he specifically offered to answer interrogatories under oath following the audition of the tapes.

On its record, the Rodino committee is quite careful, and in the end we must trust it will do the right thing. But we must say that the immediate reaction to the President's speech by its liberal wing reminded us of little boys whose toy had been taken away. To say the President, who has been taking a beating in the headlines every day for a year, should not take his case to the public—to say that the President should not be the judge of relevance when he is supplying such a mass of material—to say that Mr. Rodino and Mr. Hutchinson are not smart enough to authenticate the transcripts on their own—these are the arguments of very confused persons.

At the same time, even if perusal of all the documents does not yield any case for impeaching the President, the Watergate affair will stand as a serious mark against him—not only because of the lawbreaking in his administration but because his handling of the affair has aggravated the damage to the nation. If only yesterday's release of documents had come a year ago, how much grief and turmoil would have been avoided.

But at least the President has finally taken the initiative of putting the evidence before the public, preserving an element of Executive privilege but essentially playing down the argument about prerogatives that has caused so much delay. We hope that the Rodino committee will also play down its own hassles over prerogatives, address itself instead to the mass of evidence now available, and do what it can to end Watergate one way or another.