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Nixon's Candor: Effect Debated

By CLIFTON DANIEL
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WASHINGTON, May 1—Will it hurt him or help him? That was the bottom-line question being asked in Washington today about President Nixon's release of more than 1,300 pages of transcripts of Watergate conversations. The President's friends, who had been urging him for months to "come clean," felt that the torrential outpouring of evidence could only help in the fight against impeachment.

Mr. Nixon's special Watergate counsel, James D. St. Clair, was one of those. But he, like other advisers of the President, said, "You have to read this thing virtually in its entirety"—and it is about a quarter of a million words long. "In the end," said Ken W. Clawson, the White House director of communications, "after the entire document has been read, digested and thought about, the public, members of Congress and the news media

will come to the same conclusion we do—that, the President's verbal thoughts notwithstanding, in the end he acted properly."

Varied Reaction

Initially, however, the White House was getting a mixed reaction to the publication of the transcripts. Some of the President's supporters were exulting: "We're out of the woods." Others were shocked: "Gee, this is terrible stuff."

One White House staff member surmised that the news media, having had so little time to digest so vast a document, went through it hastily and, not unnaturally, picked out the most sensational items. He heard that some members of the House Judiciary Committee, who got their copies earlier than the press did, were doing the same—photocopying juicy items for their colleagues and friends.

Representative John Brademas of Indiana, whose post as deputy Democratic leader of the House keeps him in constant contact with the membership, said, "On balance, I would say Mr. Nixon has been hurt by this."

No One Took Floor

Yesterday, Republicans were hurrying to the floor of the House to praise the President after he had announced his intention to release the transcripts.

"Today," the House Democratic leader, Thomas P. O'Neill Jr. of Massachusetts, said, "not one man took the floor."

"It means," another member said, "that we will impeach the President in the last week of June instead of the first week of July."

Actually, House leaders are expecting a vote on impeachment toward the end of July.

What shocked members of Congress—at least those who were willing to appear shocked—was not merely the evidence in the transcripts that the President had taken part in

discussions about hushing up and covering up the Watergate affair. They also professed to be scandalized by the private man revealed to them: The President who used coarse language and ran down his own associates.

Many Persons Damaged

I think he has hurt a lot of people," a prominent Washington lawyer said.

However, it is not an impeachable offense to say, as Mr. Nixon did, that L. Patrick Gray 3d, who was acting director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, "isn't very smart."

The ultimate question about the transcripts, which were supplied to the Judiciary Committee and the public, was whether they provided evidence to support the President's impeachment in the House and conviction in the Senate.

President Defended

In the legal argument that accompanied the transcripts, Mr. St. Clair said they proved "that the President had no prior knowledge of the break-in [at the Watergate headquarters of the Democratic National Committee on June 17, 1972] and that he had no knowledge of any cover-up prior to March 21, 1973."

"In all of the thousands of words spoken, even though they often are unclear and ambiguous, not once does it appear that the President of the United States was engaged in a criminal plot to obstruct justice," the argument said.

Still not one thing was done or said in Washington today that would lead anyone to believe that, in the eyes of the House of Representatives, the transcripts had exonerated President Nixon.

Whether they had a persuasive effect on those 34 Senators whom Mr. Nixon must have on his side to avoid conviction was not easy to learn. Senators, who see themselves as the President's judges, were keeping their counsel.