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The Unintelligible Man

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, May 1—"It'll stir up quite a storm," a drained, relieved President Nixon told a caller a few hours after delivering his television address releasing tape transcripts. "There's some rough stuff in there."

And why hadn't he released them months earlier? He had to wait until the indictments were in, the President explained, and then until the Stans-Mitchell trial was over—and, "It took time to get all this together."

But the primary reason for withholding the transcripts until survival demanded their release dawned on the caller after reading the quarter-million words in the sky-blue binder: Some of the stuff is damnably rough.

The tape-and-tell memoirs illuminate a dark side of Richard Nixon: his need to hide the sleazy wiretaps and break-ins that took place before Watergate; his desire to appear candid while remaining circumspect; his fear of personally confronting John Mitchell, passing that unpleasant job along to John Ehrlichman with instructions to secretly bug the room. No wonder the President never wanted this to see the light of day: much of this scurrying-around is what goes on under a flat rock.

The transcripts show the man in the Oval Office to be guilty of conduct unbecoming a President. The language used in private is not the problem—in fact, "since March 21 when I had that conversation with Dean, I have broken my ass to try to get the facts of this case." is the most heartwarming observation in it—but the President's reluctance to recognize reality is incredible, and the weakness displayed in not taking charge of events so as to build a firewall between the Presidency and the scandal is inexcusable.

When Mr. Nixon realized how abysmally out of touch and isolated an executive he had been, he compounded his mistake by getting too much in touch. By allowing loyalty to his old friends and hatred for his enemies to becloud his judgment, he failed to execute ruthlessly, as a Chief Executive sometimes must.

One of his advisers at the time recalled a remark attributed to Gladstone: "A Prime Minister must be a bit of a butcher"; Mr. Nixon did not have the heart to swing the ax with moral fervor and suffers for it now. In a genuine panic, the sensible man is the one who pushes the panic button.

The President's defense is that he was groping in the dark: In the weeks after March 21, as the mystery slowly

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unfolded, the transcripts show his agonized amazement. To his post-speech caller this week, the President laid stress on how much had been withheld from him by John Dean on the 21st: "What he didn't tell me was more important than what he did."

Mr. Dean did not tell the President that he had coached Mr. Magruder in perjury in John Mitchell's presence, or that he had handled payoff money himself, or that he had offered clemency to Magruder and James McCord or that he had taken the notebooks from Howard Hunt's safe and shredded that evidence; in "telling all," Mr. Dean did not begin to sketch the outlines of his own villainy.

Suddenly Mr. Dean's massive confidence game with the Senate Watergate committee comes into focus: On all three networks, he sought repeatedly to implicate the President in the Watergate cover-up by backdating some of what had been said in the March 21 meeting. That he deliberately backdated, probably to show that his hush-money payments had always been approved, is apparent now.

Special Prosecutor Jaworski's unwillingness to move against Mr. Dean on a set of perjury counts is a cover-up scandal in itself, and one day may receive the investigation it deserves.

Just as the transcripts answer the famous Senate committee question—"What did he know and when did he know it?"—in a way that show the President to have been wrapped in an innocent cocoon, they call attention to his damaging acquiescence in the payments to Howard Hunt. That is "rough stuff," and although the President equivocates toward the end in a way that makes it hard to prove him guilty of a crime, it is hard to read that transcript without a sinking feeling.

"Oh, they'll pick out a line here and a line there," Mr. Nixon tells his friends, but he believes that the totality of the evidence will enable his Presidency to survive. And so it might; perhaps the Congress will be satisfied with the personal humiliation of the President.

His friends always knew there was a dark side to Mr. Nixon; seeing it so vividly in this excruciating exculpation, it is hard to keep in mind that there are other sides to the man neither phony nor ignoble.

That is why the first reaction to his temperate speech was one of hope, and the reaction after reading the poisonous fruit of his eavesdropping tree is "(expletive deleted)!"