

Courtly Conversations

By Tom Wicker

WASHINGTON, May 2—If nothing else, the transcripts of Richard Nixon's conversations have shown how hollow the once magic invocation of the words "national security" can be. It may well be that Mr. Nixon unwittingly has done the public the great service of destroying that phrase as a useful tool of Presidential deception.

The passage occurs in the famous Nixon-Haldeman-Dean conversation of March 21, 1973, just after Mr. Nixon has expressed concern about the "Ehrlichman situation" deriving from the burglary of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist in 1971. E. Howard Hunt has been threatening to talk about that burglary, which could implicate John Ehrlichman, Mr. Nixon's top assistant for domestic affairs.

John Dean says: "You might put it on a national security grounds basis."

"It absolutely was," interjects H. R. Haldeman.

An unclear passage follows, then "P" comments: "National security.

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We had to get information for national security grounds."

But if they make that claim, asks Mr. Dean, why wouldn't they have had the F.B.I. or the C.I.A. do the job rather than the White House "plumbers"?

"P. Because we had to do it on a confidential basis."

"H. Because we were checking them."

"P. Neither could be trusted."

More discussion. Then Mr. Dean says matter-of-factly: "I think we could get by on that."

This is a cover story constructed, one that has been used ever since to describe the reasons for a burglary, one that is still being used by Mr. Ehrlichman in his defense against criminal charges that ultimately stemmed from the burglary. Thus is it shown, as has long been apparent to close observers how easily the phrase "national security" can be trotted out for almost any purpose a President desires.

Another passage suggests not only Mr. Nixon's turn of mind but the

danger inherent in the kind of unchecked, almost unlimited power that had been developed in the Presidency up to the time the Watergate case began to take it apart. In another Nixon-Haldeman-Dean conversation, Sept. 15, 1972, before these men knew of the deep trouble they were soon to be in, Mr. Dean remarked that he had started a list of persons "who are emerging as less than our friends."

"P. I want the most comprehensive notes on all those who tried to do us in. They didn't have to do it. If we had a very close election and they were playing the other side I would understand this. No—they were doing this quite deliberately and they are asking for it and they are going to get it. We have not used the power in this first four years as you know. We have never used it. We have not used the bureau and we have not used the Justice Department but things are going to change now. And they are either going to do it right or go."

"D. What an exciting prospect."
Two months later, the man who said that "things are going to change now" won re-election by a landslide—four more years. He immediately set about extending his personal control over the departments and agencies of Government by placing aides specifically loyal to him in high posts—Egil Krogh as Under Secretary of Transportation, for instance, and L. Patrick Gray as F.B.I. director.

The exploding Watergate case quickly knocked Mr. Nixon from the pinnacle of power he had reached just after his second inaugural. If it hadn't, who knows where his expressed willingness to use Government power for his personal political ends might have taken him and the country? Still, the point is not so much what Richard Nixon might have done, or even, as he contends, what other Presidents did; the point is what any President could do, as long as the present power relationships between the White House, the Federal agencies, and the other branches of Government are as one-sided as they have become in this century.

This central problem also is apparent in the solicitude the other principal actors who speak in these remarkable transcripts— from H.R. Haldeman to Henry Petersen—showed at all times for the protection of what they persistently referred to as "the Presidency"—never Richard Nixon's scalp. They were like courtiers surrounding a king who could very neatly say with Louis, "I am the state."

That is why the real problem is deeper than that of determining Mr. Nixon's guilt or innocence of specific deeds, important as that is. Rather, it is to find a new set of checks and balances capable of restraining the most powerful executive office in history. That is a subject requiring further discussion.