

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

A Jury of 200 Million

Release by the President of the Watergate transcript is a significant milestone in the evolution of the democratic process. A vast nation now has it within its power to make a crucial decision—whether to impeach its President—not on the basis of second-hand knowledge but with access to the most intimate conversations and thoughts of the President and his closest advisers.

We don't know what this decision will be or how, precisely, it will be made. Certainly not 200 million people—probably not even 200,000—will read the full transcript. But we have confidence that somehow the mysterious forces of public opinion will arrive at a just decision and that it will be based in large part on all the separate interpretations of those rambling presidential conversations recorded in the transcript. Whatever other mistakes he has made, the President did a necessary and proper thing in taking his case to the people.

Some questions of authentication have been raised, of course. John Doar, the House Judiciary Committee special counsel, immediately charged that some of the taped remarks that the White House transcript terms "unintelligible" were in fact intelligible to his own experts listening to those of the tapes that are in his possession. Mr. Doar said he was not charging deliberate distortion but his remarks came close to that. He has an obligation to cite chapter and verse, publicly. The committee has as heavy an obligation as the White House to set the public straight.

Whatever the flaws in the transcript, the President has laid his cards on the table, albeit reluctantly, to an extent unprecedented among leaders of great nations. The 1,308 pages and 200,000 words, complete with damaging personal remarks about people like Patrick Gray and Hugh Sloan, approach the ultimate in disclosure.

We cannot yet perceive all the effects of this. Certainly, some are painful to others besides the President and there may be some damage as well to public concepts of government. The disclosure does not prove the President's critics have been wrong, since there is plenty of room for interpretations to differ, for example, over what was really

meant when the President said, "it is wrong—that's for sure."

Some readers will apply an absolute standard, that the presidency must be above reproach and that the vengeance of the people should be inflicted upon any President who has wavered in upholding the law. Some, on the other hand, will be impressed with the President's complex and painful problem of smoking out guilt among his closest advisers at the same time as he was trying to conduct the other affairs of the nation. Some will be moved by his loyalty to longtime associates implicated in the affair. Yet still others will be scornful of his weakness as an executive in not flaying about him in righteous wrath. Some will think the whole mess grew from another form of weakness, in selecting men and providing them moral leadership.

The impressions will all differ but few readers will fail to be impressed by the further elements of Greek drama that have characterized Watergate from the start. Large questions and knotty moral issues evolve steadily until a powerful man is forced to make excruciating decisions. As in good drama, the transcript shows the characters foremost as being human—not cartoon caricatures, gods of the press agents, actors before the TV camera. Their doubts, confusions, evasions, fears and conceits gently penetrate to the consciousness.

But whatever the drama and the perceptions, the public must soon decide a President's fitness, and decide through moral judgments as complex and difficult as those the President himself faced in weighing the futures of Dean, Haldeman, Ehrlichman and Mitchell. No one will hurry the decision, least of all the House Judiciary Committee, which was relatively mild in its remonstrance over being handed a transcript rather than the tapes themselves. Congressmen need some time for their own opinions and public opinion to jell.

But whatever opinions do jell, there is far less need than before to base them on speculation. The force of public opinion has pushed the White House into an unprecedented disclosure, and its force will also ultimately decide the meaning of what was disclosed.