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William Raspberry

By Auth for the Philadelphia Inquirer

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What Is He Holding Back?

Why did he do it? Why did he destroy his honor, his reputation, any possibility of a respectable place in history, by publishing that incredible, mind-boggling expose?

Whatever else is contained in that mass of expurgated transcripts, there is this important revelation: Richard Nixon does not make major decisions without consulting all his top people, without trying out various "scenarios" as to what might work from a legal or public relations point of view and without weighing what course would do him, personally, the least possible damage.

This was no rash, impetuous undertaking.

He must have known what harm last Tuesday's "submission" would do to his personal reputation. Thus the only reasonable explanation as to why he did it is that he saw the alternatives as worse.

And that, really, is what is so fascinating about the transcript bombshell.

What could possibly be worse? What on earth could he be holding back?

He's holding back some incredibly foul language, to be sure, and some gross personal references. But the punctuation of the transcripts with "expletive deleted" (not to mention the convenient "unintelligibles") makes his conversation seem almost as obscene as the real words might.

He's also holding back the tapes themselves, and whatever tone-of-voice clues they might contain.

But unless there are deliberate mis-transcriptions, you have to assume he's holding back a lot more. The swear words would be merely embarrassing, and if anything is clear it is that Richard Nixon has given up his efforts to save face and is concentrating on saving the other end of the presidential person.

So what else could he be holding back?

The best guess is that he is making as clean a breast as he dares on the specific question of the Watergate break-in and its cover-up because some other areas of the congressional in-

quiry are potentially far more damaging.

Perhaps he is hoping that the House Judiciary Committee and the press will be so fascinated by the wealth of presidential insights, miscalculations and embarrassments that they will forget about other areas of the impeachment inquiry: the ITT scandal, for instance, or the dairy deal, or the use of the Internal Revenue Service as an instrument of his personal vengeance. Or perhaps some shocking thing as yet unsuspected.

The expurgated version—edited and circulated by the President himself—shows clearly that Mr. Nixon not only discussed the political wisdom of granting executive clemency to burglars but actually authorized—ordered, in fact—the payment of hush money to Howard Hunt.

The cleaned-up edition of the transcripts reveals that morality was not a consideration in the President's deliberations, and that legality was a consideration in pragmatic terms only.

His own take-my-word-for-it account reveals Richard Nixon's earlier versions of the Watergate episode as significantly less reliable and candid than John Dean's—and Dean apparently didn't even know the recordings were being made.

The "investigation" Dean was ordered to make, and the "report" he was sent off to Camp David to produce, turn out to have been an effort to come up with a "scenario" that would both encompass all the facts already known (or likely to come out) and at the same time show the President and his staff to be innocent of covering up crime, obstructing justice or suborning perjury. Dean couldn't bring it off.

But Richard Nixon made public the attempt. He exposed himself as foul-mouthed, amoral, conniving and contemptuous of those whose reputations were being destroyed on his account. He made public his thorough-going confusion, his inability to see clearly the inevitable results of certain courses of action and even a surprising ignorance of the law that is his chosen profession.

And yet he was making no clean breast of the scandal that engulfs him, since he still refused to honor the Judiciary Committee's subpoena.

What he apparently is hoping is that despite the horrible embarrassment of the "submission," there will be enough ambiguity, enough room for alternative explanations of actions that seem fairly obvious, that his revelations will fall short of absolute proof of presidential criminality.

And if you believe that, you almost have to believe that what he is holding back would convict him beyond any possible doubt. The book that is the literary sensation of the century is a fantastic gamble that can be justified only on the ground that there was no other choice.

He comes off very much like a wild animal who chews off his leg in order to escape the certain death of the hunter's steel trap. It is a desperate, excruciatingly painful thing to do, but it has to be done.

Even if it means bleeding to death after all.
