

The Answers in The Transcripts



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WHEN IT WAS announced a week ago that the White House would release transcripts of certain presidential tapes, I voiced a sure prediction: Someone is going to say, "The transcripts raise more questions than they answer."

Sure enough, the next voice on the television screen was the voice of Carl Stern of NBC. He was saying, "The transcripts raise more questions than they answer." Nonsense. The transcripts do raise certain new questions, having to do with the transcripts themselves, but this monumental publication answers more Watergate questions than most Americans will ever want to ask.

What were the big questions? Let me grapple with two or three.

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DID THE PRESIDENT know in advance about the bugging and burglary of Democratic National Headquarters? The answer is, he did not know. In the whole of these 1300 pages there is not a line, a hint, or a breath of a suggestion of any such foreknowledge.

Did Mr. Nixon know of the ensuing cover-up? He did not know. By early March of 1973 he had inklings, but it was not until 10:12 o'clock on the morning of March 21 that he began to get the whole story.

Do the transcripts tell us how and why Watergate happened? Yes, they do. This wretched business happened because Gordon Liddy was strong and persistent; be-

cause John Mitchell was weak and preoccupied; because Charles Colson was vain and presumptuous; because Jeb Magruder was obedient and inexperienced.

The subsequent cover-up resulted out of the misguided loyalty and bad judgment of John Dean, John Ehrlichman and H. R. Haldeman. They kept their knowledge from the President.

Did Mr. Nixon act wisely and responsibly once he heard the story? The answer is yes and no. He acted humanly.

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THE TRANSCRIPTS are enormously, painfully embarrassing to the President. They provide an opportunity for his critics in politics and the media to pluck him like a live chicken. He says and does things that are less than admirable. Every deletion — and there are many deletions — is certain to provoke new suspicions.

One is reminded, ironically, of poor old Job, who was scorned by his friends and smitten by his enemies. "How long will ye vex my soul," he asked, "and break me in pieces with words?" Job was convinced he had acted rightly, and that the record would show it: "Oh that my words were now written! Oh that they were printed in a book!"

Mr. Nixon's book is now written, not by his adversaries but by himself, and my own impression is that he emerges from its pages in pretty good shape.