

Thinking Things Over

By VERMONT ROYSTER

Dramatis Personae

Those Nixon transcripts may play an uncertain role in the impeachment trial, what with disputes over their accuracy and puzzles amid their ambiguities. But for the idle gossip, the morbidly curious and the amateur psychologist they are a treasure house of drama among the high and the mighty.

Most of the attention, even here, is naturally focused on the principal actor. After all, not only is Richard Nixon the protagonist and so given the most lines but he is also the most complex character on the stage. Still, it would be a pity if the audience is so distracted that it does not notice those others who from time to time make their entrances and their exits.

For a leisurely re-reading of this discursive script shows it to offer a rich assortment of characters, each interesting in his own way. They interact both with the man at the center and also with each other. And in that interaction there lie some clues as to why the drama developed as it did.

We, of course, know how Richard Nixon came at last to know the dimensions of the Watergate story and how, once knowing, he still vacillated all Hamlet-like between this course and another. What the script tells us is why the story was so slow unfolding, and it gives us a glimpse of why Mr. Nixon was so long torn between candor and concealment, seeing in each its own convincing imperative.

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Of all these other characters who play their parts the most fascinating is John Dean. In this script we meet him first in September, 1972, boyish, exuberant, eager to please, given to good cheer and even to laughter. We follow him in other scenes in which he assures the President that none of his intimate White House counselors are involved in the Watergate affair.

Then in March, 1973, we find him first dropping hints that maybe some in the White House are entangled in the plot after all. Next comes that famous scene of the 21st in which he warns Mr. Nixon of "a cancer close to the Presidency" and that people might start perjuring themselves.

Finally, we find Mr. Dean bitter and accusatory and slowly learn that all along he had been less than candid about his own role in the story. Somehow he had never mentioned to the President that he himself had helped Jeb Magruder prepare that grand jury testimony now allegedly perjured. Or that he had destroyed documents from Howard Hunt's files. Or that he had handled money paid to earlier Watergate defendants.

It was also Dean who told the President—or so it says here in the transcript—that

"I have the impression that you don't know everything I know" and then later told the Ervin committee that the President did so know everything far earlier. Truly an intriguing character.

But it was not only Dean, or so it appears, who was less than candid in these conversations. In those long meetings during the fall and winter you get no hints from either Haldeman or Ehrlichman, the President's most trusted advisers, that they might be implicated in any way. That isn't clearly suggested until April when Attorney General Kleindienst reports to the President on some Justice Department investigations.

So, as you eavesdrop, you can hardly avoid the impression that those intimate with the President had become a league of frightened men. They not only withheld information but directed the conversations toward ways to keep from being hurt themselves as events crowded in. If the President also indulged in that sort of talk, he got much encouragement.

Elsewhere, too, there is the stuff of drama. Surely there is poignancy in the President's reaction to the first hints that those two closest advisers might be implicated. "Implicate Haldeman? I have asked both Haldeman and Ehrlichman . . . and they have given me absolute . . . I don't believe Haldeman or Ehrlichman could ever—you know . . . hurts to be so close to people and yet. . ."

There is like poignancy in the President's agonizing over whether to ask them to resign. On the one hand he says over and over that he doesn't want to shield them from a grand jury; on the other he doesn't want to brand them as having been pre-judged by firing them.

So again and again he puts the question both to himself and to others who come in to talk to him, to Attorney General Kleindienst, to Assistant Attorney General Petersen, to his old and good friend, Secretary Rogers. All see the dilemma, all advise him to wait. And wait the President does. Perhaps too long.

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Indeed, as you read this script it becomes clear that the President, vacillating, waited too long on too much. On appointing a special prosecutor, suggested a year ago by Mr. Kleindienst. On convening a special grand jury. On baring the whole record. On being forthright with press and public on what he had learned.

The paradox here is that Richard Nixon, by reputation a cynical man proved too trusting, by reputation a grand inquisitor proved not inquisitive enough. By reputation a ruthless politician, he could not bring himself ruthlessly to chop off heads when both his own career and the presidency required it.

And most of all a man who by reputation ran his own show and made his own decisions is revealed here as letting his staff run unwatched and unchecked, and then when the crunch came letting those around him lead him, indecisive, first one way and then another.

The fascination is in watching all this interplay. Those men around Richard Nixon, the men he picked, are hardly an admirable crew. He himself emerges as a

man too insecure to be resolute in problems that threaten him personally. But in these transcripts there is a complexity to the story that does not show in simple snippets on the evening news.

All that may have little to do with the question whether to impeach the President for misdemeanors done. Still, those who read the transcripts for this question only do miss some very human drama awaiting the playwright to do it justice.