

Exclusive Nixon Interview

By James J. Kilpatrick
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Washington

President Nixon will not resign "under any circumstances." He will not surrender his office even temporarily to Vice President Gerald Ford under the 25th Amendment.

If the House of Representatives should vote to impeach, he will accept the verdict "with good grace." He will then defend himself to the very end of a Senate trial.

The President made these views perfectly clear — emphatically clear — in an interview with this correspondent in the Oval Office Tuesday morning.

He acknowledged that he had given "long thought" to the possibility of resignation. For one overriding reason he has now discarded that option and will not consider it again. The reason is that for him to resign under the pressure of mere popular opinion, in his view, would fatally weaken presidents of the future.

As for taking refuge in the 25th Amendment: This is a "rather fatuous suggestion," advanced by people who "do not know what is going on in the world."

The President talked soberly and sadly of the Watergate affair. He said it was true, as John Mitchell had surmised, that he would have "blown my top" if he had known of the bugging at the time.

He recalled how much he had resented it when he learned that his own offices had been bugged in his 1962 gubernatorial campaign. He also remembered 1968 with equal resentment: "There was not only surveillance by the FBI, but bugging by the FBI, and (J. Edgar) Hoover told me that my plane in the last two weeks was bugged."

Mr. Nixon also discussed the now famous White House tapes: He thought he was wrong ever to have permitted these recordings in the first place, but he supposed the remaining tapes eventually will be deposited in a presidential library for the use of historians 25 or 30 years hence, after the participants are dead.

In a long soliloquy, Mr. Nixon spoke of the need for a strong American president equipped by experi-

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ence to deal at the summit with world leaders. He was asked if worse comes to worst, and he is put on trial by the Senate, could he simultaneously manage the affairs of the country and look after his own defense.

"Yes," he said grimly. "And I intend to."

During the course of the interview — more of a monologue than an interview — the President spoke with guarded optimism about Republican prospects in November, when he expects the "gut issues" of peace and prosperity to favor his party. He got in a few mild licks at the "ultra-liberal" press. He termed himself both a conservative and a Wilsonian.

The President looked well and strong. He also looked his full 60 years. In response to a question, he said he sleeps very well — "as well as anybody at his age sleeps." Having profited from earlier crises, he has been able to survive Watergate without "tingling nerves and a churning stomach."

To this observer, it seemed evident that the President has lost some of the edge of sharp incisiveness that he exhibited a few years ago. Mr. Nixon's conversation tends to run off on tangents. A reporter, studying his shorthand notes, finds them littered with broken sentences. But the President plainly is in command of his situation: "I am a disciplined man," he said at one point.

Mr. Nixon spoke from behind an immaculate desk. Outside the great windows of the Oval Office, a crew of White House gardeners pattered about the lawn. His mood was at once reflective and determined. mined.

Once he raised his voice in anger when this correspondent suggested that the President's associates might have "betrayed" him by failing to keep him informed: "I'm not going to indulge in a conversation with you or anybody else condemning men who have given very great service to this country."

Otherwise he reacted even to sharp questions with quiet good humor. In an hour and 20 minutes not a single expletive had to be deleted.

The Future

What of the future? "I would have to rule out resignation. And I would have to rule out the rather fatuous suggestion that I take the 25th Amendment and just step out and have Vice President Ford step in for a while. If the House should vote an impeachment, and we go to trial by the Senate, of course I would follow that course. It would be immensely time-consuming, but I could do it, and I would do it for reasons that are not — what do you call it — those of a foreador in the ring, trying to prove himself, but I would do it because I have given long thought to what is best for the country, our system of government, and the constitutional process.

"I am a disciplined man, and you can be sure that what would come first, even in such a trial, would be the business of this government."

The President feels he is equipped and experienced to handle the great issues he sees ahead — "our dialogue with the Chinese, the enormously important negotiations which will continue with the Russians, and the very delicate situation in the Mideast."

Mr. Nixon turned away from his interviewer and gazed at the gardens without seeing them. He talked of the role he wants to play in the search for relative



AP Wirephoto

James J. Kilpatrick and President Nixon during the interview in the Oval Office at the White House

peace; "We have one of those times when certain forces are coming together that may never come together again. We must seize this moment. If we do not seize it, the world will inevitably move to a conflagration that will destroy everything that we've made—everything that this civilization has produced."

Head of State

Foreign policy, he said, no longer is made by foreign ministers. It is made by heads of state. "I have to be here, and I intend to be here." It would create a gap for a president to say "Well, I've been impeached by the House, and I'll just step aside, and somebody else will step in." In Mr. Nixon's view "it would be wrong."

This is the key point he said on resignation: "The United States holds the key as to whether peace survives and whether freedom survives. That demands a strong United States — strong militarily, strong economically, and strong in the character of its people, a people with a sense of vision, not turning inward and tearing each other apart, and not becoming soft as they become rich. But it also requires, whoever may be in this office, a strong President. I will never leave this office in a way which resigning would be, or failing to fight impeachment would be, that would make it more difficult for future presidents to make the tough decisions."

If he should resign now, Mr. Nixon said, "knowing that I am not guilty of any offense under the Constitution that is called an impeachable offense," every president in the future would be constantly peering over his shoulder toward Capitol Hill. A president cannot be strong if he worries incessantly about his popularity or about the possibility of impeachment.

'I Will Not Resign'

He did not mean that a president should be bull-headed or arrogant. It is only that a president "must do what is right, whatever the public opinion may be

at the moment." Unless the United States has such presidents for the next 25 years, "the chance for peace and freedom to survive in the world is down the tube. That's the reason I won't resign."

"I will not resign," the President repeated, "and I will of course present the case on impeachment before the House as effectively as we can. I shall accept the verdict in good grace, but I know that the United States of America means something in the world today not just because of its military and economic strength, but also because it has stability in its leadership. Resignation or impeachment would have the traumatic effect of destroying that sense of stability and leadership. And as far as this particular president is concerned, I will not be a party under any circumstances to any action which would set that kind of precedent."

He was asked how he let the Watergate affair get out of hand at the beginning.

"As I look back," he said, "and here history will have to record whether I made the right decision in terms of the allocation of my time, my major error was not doing what many persons very appropriately criticized me for doing in previous campaigns — and that was running my own campaign."

In other years, he recalled, he had checked everything out himself. In 1972, "I didn't look at budgets, I didn't look at personnel — I just didn't pay enough attention to the campaign." He never would have tolerated the Watergate incident if he had known of it: "I believe in hard, tough campaigning, but I believe it has to be fair."

When he first learned of the original Watergate arrests, he was concerned for the embarrassment it would cause his campaign. Soon his concern broadened: He feared the FBI's investigation would become entangled with CIA operations in the national security, and this he was determined to avoid.

Disengagement

The thought never crossed his mind that blackmail, hush money and a coverup might emerge. Ruefully he conceded that such a thought probably should have crossed his mind, that "we'd better do something to keep these guys in good shape or they are going to tell all the story." But he was preoccupied with other things — chiefly with the final stages of disengagement in Vietnam.

Two weeks ago, the President was reminded, his chief counsel, James S. Clair, had met with the press. St. Clair was asked if all the national security incidents that the plumbers engaged in had been made public. St. Clair had responded: "I don't know. I doubt it." The President was asked for comment: Had all the incidents been revealed?

"There are some that have not been and never will be," he said. Senators Sam Ervin (Dem-N.C.) and Howard Baker (Rep-Tenn.) know of these unpublished matters, but the national security continues to demand that the incidents be kept under wraps.

The conversation turned to general comment on the necessity, as the President sees it, for secrecy in the conduct of foreign affairs.

"You cannot in today's world have successful diplomacy without secrecy. It is impossible. I used to say that I believe in the Wilsonian doctrine of open covenants openly arrived at. But that was Wilson at his idealistic best and his pragmatic worst. Open covenants, yes: There should be no secret agreements that the country is not totally committed to. But openly arrived at? There would be no covenants. It is impossible. And it is particularly impossible when you are dealing not with your friends, but with your adversaries."

Surely this was true, the President said, in the opening to China. It never would have occurred without the highest secrecy. Nobody knew about the overtures save the President, Henry Kissinger and a few aides sworn in secrecy. Mr. Nixon was asked: Did his Vice President know?

"Agnew?" the President seemed incredulous. "Agnew? Oh, of course not."

Presidential Tapes

Returning to contemporary issues, Mr. Nixon responded to a question about the new origin and ultimate disposition of the presidential tapes.

"They were made, curiously enough, in a very off-hand decision. We had no tapes, as you know, up until 1971. I think one day Haldeman walked in and said, 'The library believes it is essential that we have tapes,' and I said why? He said, well, Johnson had tapes — they're in his library at Austin — and these are invaluable records. Kennedy also had tapes, and he said, 'You ought to have some record that can be used years later for historical purposes.' I said all right. I must say that after the system was put in, as the transcribed conversations clearly indicated, I wasn't talking with knowledge or with the feeling that the tapes were there. Otherwise I might have talked differently."

"My own view," Mr. Nixon added, "is that taping of conversations for historical purposes was a bad decision on the part of all the presidents. I don't think Kennedy should have done it, and I don't think we should have done it."

The remaining tapes, the President supposed, would be deposited in his presidential library. He had given no thought to their disposition. But in any event, the tapes would be protected by adequate security and careful guidelines so that none of his former associates would be embarrassed in their lifetimes.

Bombing Decision

The President mused that historians eventually would benefit from the candid give and take of the Vietnam war years. He supposed a tape must exist of "the loneliest decision of all, the bombing of Dec. 17, 1972, which brought the war to an end."

That decision was opposed by all his cabinet members save one, and supported only by John Connally. An earlier decision on Cambodia "had very little support from my advisers." Thirty years hence, he seemed to be saying, the making of tapes might not be viewed so coldly.

As for the transcribed tapes immediately at issue, he sees no reason to permit their further examination by technicians. "We've already done that." He scoffed at the notion that damaging material had been removed to prevent the House Judiciary Committee from discovering it.

"The committee now has constructive possession of all of the tapes — of all 42 of them. The chairman and ranking member can listen to them at any time." It is an "open-ended invitation." They can come hear for themselves. "And believe me, I wouldn't have made the offer if there was anything to hide."

Was publication of the transcripts a gamble? The President did not see it that way. Gambling, he said, offers a choice. He had played a little poker. He knew that you had a choice of getting in the pot or staying out. "In this instance we had no choice."

He would have preferred to turn over no tapes at all. That was the right position in the beginning, and "had we prevailed in the courts, it was the position I would have stuck to." But the public had to be assured that he knew nothing of Watergate or the coverup, and that he did something about it when he learned the facts.

"I did an awful lot. I cut off one arm, then the other arm, and April of 1973 was about as rugged a period as anybody could be through."