

THE STORY OF P

A computer unmasks the man behind the transcripts



WORDS," WROTE TENNYSON, "like Nature, half reveal/And half conceal the Soul within." One of the fascinations of the White House transcripts is the glimpse they provide into the concealed half of Richard Nixon's soul.

Despite all the obvious doctoring—the bowdlerizing, emendations, and egregious omissions—we still have more than 100,000 revealing words uttered by P in private conversations with his intimates or co-conspirators. To pursue the truths behind those words, we also have available to us the standard techniques practiced by people who take words seriously: psychologists, who trace recurring image patterns through their patients' speech; sociologists, who compile content analyses; and literary critics, who weigh writers' words in order to find the

meaning behind the meaning. Using a computer-generated analysis prepared at Cornell University,* we can apply those techniques to the transcripts.

As it turns out, almost a third of P's private talk is devoted to rehearsals—to trying out public speech. Consider the transition from private to public mode in the follow-

* Cornell's involvement with computer-assisted language analysis goes back to 1959, when Professor Stephen M. Parrish edited a concordance of Matthew Arnold's poetry. Since then, the Computer Concordance Project has published fourteen other volumes and carried out various special projects. The study of P's words—carried out by Parrish and Peter Shames, a programmer—contains about three-quarters of a mile of computer output, including an alphabetized index of P's every word.

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ing exchange among P, Ehrlichman (E), and Haldeman (H):

P (talking of Dean): My point is—you've got to watch out. He may say, "Well they were trying to get me—conspired to get me to write a report that was untrue."

E: Well, I understand, except that he was sent to write it without anybody being near him.

P: Except Moore (unintelligible).

E: I'm sure that when he went through this exercise, it was impossible for him to write it down without it being a confession. And he said, "My God, I don't know how this case is going to break, but I'm crazy to have a piece of paper like that around."

P: Then I could say that I ordered—Who conducted the investigation?

E: The way we got it doesn't say—

H: You asked other staff members to explore this—you had Ehrlichman, Moore, Garment, Haldeman.

P: That's right. All right. And then—

E: Then you contacted some people and said "Don't hold back on my account."

P: Yes, like Hunt—Liddy.

E: Like Mitchell and Magruder.

P: I passed the word to all sources that everybody was to talk, to tell the truth, which I had done previously. I reaffirmed, I reaffirmed specific terms to specific people.

Although the final paragraph is patently untrue, P is not lying to his friends. Rather, he is in full public mode, and they are preparing him to lie to us.

COOPERATE: P uses the word *cooperate* twenty-nine times, asserting his eagerness to "fully cooperate with the grand jury," et cetera. But of those twenty-nine occurrences, only six are in the private mode. Of these, three are historical references to his difficulties investigating Alger Hiss (who plays a surprising role in the transcripts), and one is in a highly guarded conversation with Assistant Attorney General Henry Petersen, whom P regards as an adversary. The two which do bear directly on the Watergate investigation give a strikingly different picture from the public-mode uses, including P's telling Haldeman, "I don't want to. Bob, you see the point. I don't want to cooperate with the Committee."

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STRUGGLE: Once the private and public P are separated, the transcripts reveal patterns of imagery that define his view of the world. Life is a we/they battle, "the other side" being almost anyone who is not in the room with him at the moment.

During the first meeting transcribed, on the day when the original limited Watergate indictments came down, P's mood is one of ebullient confidence. "This is a war. We take a few shots and it will be over, we will give a few shots and it will be over. . . . I wouldn't want to be on the other side now, would you?" Vengeance dominates the conversation: "Just remember all the trouble we're taking, we'll get back someday." And P goes on to ask for "the most comprehensive notes on all those who tried to do us in."

But by the time of the second recorded meeting (February 28, 1973), the situation is in considerable disarray. Despite P's earlier coaching of Dean ("So you just try to button it up as well as you can"), things have started to unravel. Dorothy Hunt—carrying a purseful of \$100 bills—has died in a plane crash, the Senate has unanimously voted to mount an independent Watergate investigation, and the *New York Times* has run the first stories linking White House staffer Gordon Strachan to the Hunt-Liddy operations. Yet P is still confident of Presidential power. He advises Dean to treat Senators like cantankerous children ("You've got to be very firm with these guys"), and he later assigns Kleindienst to "baby-sit" Howard Baker.

HISS: The Hiss case comes up for the first time as the cover-up begins to fall apart. (According to Charles Colson's testimony before the House Judiciary Committee, Nixon constantly returned to the Hiss case, urging his aides—as he does Dean in this section—to "Go back and read the first chapter of *Six Crises*," his autobiography. Colson said that he had read it fourteen times during his years on the Nixon team.) Beyond its being the event that catapulted P into national politics, the case reminds him—as he wrote in *Six Crises*—that patient investigation will inevitably trap a liar (which P believes Hiss to have been). In the Hiss case, P remembers the forces of a powerful administration

arrayed against a small, determined band of Congressional investigators; this analogue to Watergate returns to haunt P as the investigators begin to close in on him.

P tells his associates to deal with the Ervin Committee by informing them, "That is the way Nixon ran the Hiss case," and urging that the Committee follow his rules. When the case next comes up, however, the context is considerably more ambiguous—indicating P's transition from investigator to suspect. In coaching Dean on the best way of dealing with Senator Ervin, he suggests that Dean say, "We are making a lot of history here, Senator. . . . A lot of history. We are setting a stirring precedent. The President, after all, let's find out what the President did know, talk about the Hiss case." The passage is marked by hubris of the sort that drives criminals to send clues about themselves to the papers.

When Hiss appears again, his identification with "the other side" has been sharply muted. Following a series of references to potential Watergate informers as instant media "heroes," P warns Haldeman that Whittaker Chambers was destroyed because he was an informer. P further drops his earlier celebration of himself as a prosecutor when—with Hiss as an unmentioned presence—he acknowledges the identification between his staff and the convicted perjurer: "Whatever we say about Harry Truman, et cetera, while it hurt him, a lot of people admired the old bastard for standing by people who were guilty as hell. And dammit, I am that kind of person." The muddled grammar might reasonably lead one to believe that P thinks of himself as "one of those people who are guilty as hell," but even apart from that quite reasonable interpretation, his clear shift from prosecutor to protector is remarkable.

The recognition that he and his staff are now cast in the Hiss role becomes firmer when P, knowing that Dean has begun to talk to the prosecutors, reminds him that "Hiss would be free today if he hadn't lied." Identification becomes complete during the final conversation in the transcripts, when P defends raising the Watergate hush-money by comparing it to publicly subscribed defense funds: "They helped

the Berrigans. You remember the Alger Hiss Defense Fund?"

By that point, in an irony enhanced by a rereading of the uncutaneous first chapter of *Six Crises*, Alger Hiss has become P's role model.

I• EVEN THOUGH HE KNOWS what investigators can do, P has his lines of defense ready: "The main thing, of course, is the isolation of the President." Isolation can be maintained, he reminds Dean, if people will just "remember that this was not done by the White House. This was done by the Committee to Re-Elect and Mitchell was the Chairman, correct?"

He is most comfortable when he can perceive himself standing alone—with perhaps two or three faithful followers—against the external forces that are out to destroy him. One by one, advisers are stricken from his list. "As for Pat Gray, (expletive deleted), I never saw him." Herbert Kalmbach: "I don't ask him anything. I don't talk to him about anything." Liddy: "I have never met him." Mitchell: "I didn't talk to him, you know." Dean: "(Inaudible) see Dean until a month ago. Never even saw him." Colson: "I don't want Colson to come in here." Richard Moore: "But I haven't talked to Moore either." And finally—when he realizes that Haldeman and Ehrlichman will have to go: "I don't have anybody to talk to."

To some extent, of course, he is driven to proclaim his isolation in order to affirm his innocence, but maintaining his self-image as a loner inevitably increases his paranoia. The language combines with the reality to give point to his early statement that "nobody is a friend of ours. Let's face it." And in a progression which is logical if not rational, he focuses increasingly on himself. The most striking variation of P's language from normal usage is the frequency of the personal pronoun *I*. The fascination with self leads to *I* appearing 4,390 times in the course of P's conversation. In normal American usage, according to the standard *Computational Analysis of Present-Day American English*, over a million words go by before *I* appears that many times. P does it in a mere hundred thousand. HANDLE: Although P continually seeks to reassert his control over

events, Watergate resists his attempts to manipulate it. He apparently realizes this midway through a public-mode passage which is interrupted by his desire to "handle" Watergate (he uses "handle" as a synonym for "control" seventy-three times during the transcripts): "We will make statements. . . . All this information, we have nothing to hide. We have to handle it. You see, I can't be in a position of basically hunkering down because you have a lot of tough questions on Watergate."

But statements won't work, "because it is not going to get better. It is going to get worse." So statements are abandoned and Ron Ziegler is sent to "go out there and bob and weave around." The boxing metaphor—one of many that dot P's speech—both capsulizes White House animosity toward the press and implies that P has, at the moment, no punches to throw.

Yet he is able to cheer himself with the reminder that his enemies are themselves disorganized, and that he retains considerable power. "I tell you this is the last gasp of our hardest opponents. They've just got to have something to squeal about it. . . . They are going to lie around and squeal. They are having a hard time now. They got the hell kicked out of them in the election."

With the conclusion of that meeting, a full week before McCord wrote his now-famous letter to Judge Sirica, P's fundamental view of the situation is already established. Watergate, like anything else that goes wrong, is simply a matter of things getting out of control. Actions are not good or evil in themselves, but become so through their effects on him; at one point, he speaks of what Segretti was up to as "Jackassery . . . which of course is a perfectly proper course of action if it works." WHISTLES, DRILLS, BACS: All through the transcripts, P struggles to make Watergate "work." But his power to control his environment slips away. Events finally take him in their grip; he becomes the controller controlled, the pursuer pursued.

The transition is seen in three overlapping metaphors that form, along with sports, the major sources of P's figures of speech: military jargon, hunting-and-fishing terms, and "tough guy" or gangster talk. Military and hunting-and-fishing themes

were established early, well before Watergate. Except for his sporadic attempts to convince Henry Petersen that they are basically on the same side (an illusion that he repeatedly punctures by using adversary boxing images: "I completed the round with Petersen. . . . I nailed him hard"), there is no false piety. P's identification with the gangsters is complete.

He worries that someone may "blow the whistle on everybody," about "indictments of people in the Presidential family," and about "Dean's not going to finger Magruder." He knows "that maybe it takes a gang" to launder money, and minimizes one associate's role by saying, "He's basically almost a bag man . . . a message carrier." Finally, he complains that the prosecutors are "working over" his people, and urges Haldeman and Ehrlichman to "beat the damn rap. They'll have one hell of a time proving it." He may not be a crook, but he talks like one.

In the military and hunting sequences, however, there is more movement, and we sense P's despair as events catch up with him. Though he was always cautious about ambush ("The Kennedy crowd is just laying in the bushes waiting to make their move"), he was initially eager for battle. By the time of the hush-money conversation, things have started to shift; though he still believes "it is better to fight it out" (one of twenty-eight times he uses "fight" or "fighting"), he is becoming aware of the difficulties: "The problem that you have are all these mine fields down the road." Watergate is a booby trap ready to explode at any moment, "I think it's ready to do that right now. I think this would trigger it without question . . . cutting Bob and the rest to pieces."

Yet surrender is unthinkable ("When you are in a battle, if you are going to fight a battle, you are going to fight it to the finish"), and he calls for "the drill" of getting the troops "maybe charged up a little on this."

But the cover-up story continues to crack, and P—sensing that there may be no way for him to win this war—avoids "escalating it," for he is aware that his soldiers have a disturbing tendency to go over to the other side. "What was Dean's line before he deserted?" he asks.

And though the military rhetoric

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("command decisions," RAND-like "scenarios") continues through the transcripts, P knows that he is losing. By the time the final battle metaphor comes around, after Ehrlichman glumly comments that "it's the end of the ball game," P responds, "Well, it is for this time, but now and then you have one fight and win the battle." The usual proverb, lodged in P's head just as firmly as it is in ours, involves—after winning the battle—losing the war.

As striking as the military metaphors are, the most intriguing shifts occur in the hunting-and-fishing sequences, as the big-game hunter becomes a hunted animal ("We have a pretty big bag" shifts to "It is terrible when they get such a big bag"); and the confident angler who dangled bait before the Ervin Committee ("They didn't bite that one very fast, did they?") becomes a fish, who must "take the gaff."

SNAKES, WOLVES, FISH: The prosecutors are now the hunters and fishermen, and John Mitchell, whom P once urged to go after "the big game," has become fair game himself: "The real target here is Mitchell."

And the animals that surround P as he flees from his pursuers are no longer the "squealing" weaklings from "the other side," but are poisonous snakes whose very existence paralyzes him. "Oh, I'll move on it. . . I'll move on it. I'm just trying to think about whether—before Magruder strikes."

P has tried to hide his own involvement. "Well," he tells Petersen in an apparently inadvertent burst of honesty, "I am just trying to cover my tracks on the Dean thing. . ." But it does him no good, and the prosecutors, "trying to track on perjury," are gaining on him. As they close in, he attempts to reassure his shrinking crew of loyalists, telling Haldeman, "Look, the point is . . . throwing you to the wolves. . . What does that accomplish?"

What it accomplishes, at least in metaphor, is to lighten the load so that P can increase his own distance from his pursuers. And in reality, anyone close to P had damn well better be worried about his doing it. "Look, if they get a hell of a big fish, that is going to take a lot of the fire out of this thing on the cover-up and all that sort. If they get the Pres-

ident's former law partner and Attorney General, you know. . ." Good-bye, John Mitchell.

There are eight references to people implicated in Watergate as fish, with Sirica, who "has to realize that he's getting bigger fish," as the chief fisherman, and the prosecutors helping by "putting a net on that money." But though P is willing to abandon his friends, he is worried about the consequences "when the big fish start flopping around" on land. He is equally concerned with what happens to men immersed in water—to creatures out of their element, in an environment that impersonally destroys them as surely as lack of water destroys a fish.

DROWNING: In an extraordinary cluster of metaphors beginning late in the transcripts, he conjures up a series of drowning men. He begins with three references to a scuttled ship, from which Jeb Magruder has "pulled the plug," and continues to imagine Magruder in the water, desperate (and therefore uncontrollable), "thrashing around. . . going down. . . sinking." Colson is already in it "up to his navel," and the waters are rising, "they'll get a full tide when they get to the grand jury."

But Colson is still an apparent ally; John Dean is an enemy, so P and Ehrlichman plot his destruction. "I wonder, John, I wonder that unless you sank Dean. . ." But, like the hunting metaphor, drowning also works two ways, and P tells William Rogers that Dean is after Haldeman and Ehrlichman. "He's doing enough to sink 'em." Still later, he complains that "Dean is the only one who can sink Haldeman or Ehrlichman," and that "he wants to drag them down with him."

Thus, by the time he concludes his last recorded conversation, P's early dismissal of Watergate as "one of those side issues" has given way to a pained recognition of reality. His troops are deserting, his men drowning, the big fish are flopping around on the beach, and—most seriously—the prosecutors have begun to uncover *his* tracks.

Surveying the wreckage, he turns to Henry Petersen and—for the first and only time in the transcripts—uses the word that has been in his thoughts all along. "Suppose," he says, "he starts trying to impeach the President." □

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