

Big Fish, Little Fish

By Tom Wicker

WASHINGTON, Nov. 21—Listening to the White House tapes being played in Judge Sirica's courtroom is an eerie experience. These are not, after all, reconstructed conversations or witnesses' recollections or the reading of notes. These words actually were spoken in these tones around the desk of a President of the United States; these talks actually went on in the White House, in that harried spring of 1973, when the world of Richard Nixon was falling apart.

"Hello, Manolo," says John Ehrlichman cordially at one point, interrupting a discourse on how to explain away the funds that had been raised for the original Watergate defendants. And the closing of a door can be heard as Mr. Nixon's valet, Manolo Sanchez, entered or left the President's office—the small routines of life going ahead amid the rising tide of disaster.

And, yes, that's the familiar voice of Richard Nixon, all right—but would it be, if it were not known to be from the transcripts? It seems deeper, quieter than the remembered voice of all those televised speeches—not so stumbling and uncertain as the transcripts suggest. Consistently, on the tapes I heard—and some who have heard the others confirm the impression—Mr. Nixon's voice is almost whispery, less audible than any of the other speakers.

Was this because he frequently sat with his feet on his desk and his head thrown back, away from the microphones? Or because, subconsciously or not, he realized the tapes were running, and these stark calculations of deceit—at one point Mr. Nixon wants to put out not "a lie, but a line"—were being preserved?

Mr. Ehrlichman's voice, on the other hand, usually sounds brisk, business-like, to-the-point, despite his reliance on jargon—a strong effort becomes "a full court press," John Mitchell "lobs mud balls" rather than criticizing. Was Mr. Ehrlichman's relatively straightforward approach—"that building next door is full of people who know that money was being raised for these people"—because he was not aware that the talks were being recorded?

There are long pauses, interrupted and abandoned sentences, voices gabbling at once—conversations going on as matter-of-factly as those in any office, about any business problem. No transcript designed to make sense of human disorder can convey the quality of ordinariness in most of the Nixon-Haldeman-Ehrlichman talks.

At times, they seemed as baffled

by Watergate's peculiarities as anyone else. Why hadn't Gordon Liddy talked? Mr. Nixon asks. "I don't understand him at all," Mr. Ehrlichman replies. "Magruder paints him as really wierd, really weird . . . there are all kinds of Liddy stories running around."

Occasionally, as in any conversation, some sudden emotion does break through. "Well, Christalmighty," says Mr. Nixon plaintively, at the thought of limiting possible indictments to Jeb Magruder and John Mitchell, "that's the fish . . . the big fish." What else can the prosecutors want? he keeps asking.

And Mr. Haldeman, reflecting on what "an unbelievable disaster" John Dean has become for the White House, carefully assures Mr. Nixon that Mr. Dean nevertheless is "not un-American and anti-Nixon," that in the end "when he sobers up, he's going to be

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very disturbed about himself." Then Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Nixon, prompting and correcting each other, as if to convince Mr. Ehrlichman and the tapes, assure themselves that they had not ordered Mr. Dean to pay hush money to Howard Hunt.

As these long-ago conversations crackle and mutter in the earphones, it is unnerving to see in the front of the courtroom the broad, hunched shoulders of John Ehrlichman, listening to himself telling Mr. Nixon, "before I get too far out on that, uh, I want to talk to an attorney," or John Mitchell, one earphone clasped to his head, impassively hearing his one-time friend, Richard Nixon, discussing whether or not Mr. Mitchell, as a former Attorney General, was likely to be sent to jail if he shouldered the blame for Watergate.

Sometimes, the taped voices momentarily convey the sense of a world turned upside down. "Poor son of a bitch," Mr. Nixon murmurs, when Mr. Ehrlichman crisply describes Herbert Porter as "a little fish who got caught in the net." Then quietly, after a long pause, a heavy sigh, Mr. Nixon says as if to himself: "It's wrong. It's wrong."

"The whole thing is just monumentally tragic," Mr. Ehrlichman answers, for once sounding unsure, bewildered.

And in almost inaudible words coming scratchily across the long months of ruin and revelation, Mr. Nixon whispers, "We're not going to let it get us down."

"Well, that's right, that's right," says Mr. Ehrlichman, brisk again, assured. "And it'll pass."