

## WATERGATE: TURNING POINT?

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If there is to be a major turning point in the fortunes of President Nixon with respect to public opinion and Watergate, it may prove to have occurred with the publishing of the detailed, White House taped conversations. Up to this point, the President had been holding his own; a little shakily perhaps, but still with some effectiveness. By the time of this happening, he had maneuvered himself into a position where almost whatever he did would be wrong. However, he didn't get there entirely on his own; his determined enemies of press and television had much to do with directing and stage-managing the performance.

Trying to wade through the day-by-day conversations as they appeared serially in the papers, we soon became bogged down in a tangled swamp of palace intrigue, political maneuvering and frantic manipulation. What the tapes may reveal may depend largely on the pre-formed prejudices of the reader; almost anything can be read into special, selected excerpts. About all that is clear is that the Watergate affair did occur, that the President had little knowledge of its details or planning beforehand, that when he was forced to recognize its existence and ramifications, he and his chief advisors spent an inordinate amount of time discussing it and doing their utmost to cover up, protect themselves and weasel a way out of the mess. This was no sinister gathering of organized plotters under the direction of a sly Master Schemer. The impression is more of a harried bunch of amateur producers trying to solve the last-minute chaos of curtain time at a grammar-school play. In fact, one of Haldeman's anguished complaints is almost laughably pathetic: "We're so (deleted) square, we get caught at everything."

We haven't really changed our opinion about the entire episode: A minor incident in the dirty everyday business of political campaigning, ridiculous in its conception and objectives and bungling in its execution, seized upon by political enemies and successfully promoted into a major White House "scandal" with the gleeful cooperation of a hostile communications network, first seeking to embarrass Richard Nixon and soon becoming dedicated to his political destruction.

Nixon has never been one of our favorite personalities—he reminded us too much of a pious grammar-school classmate; an irritating, scrubbed, properly-dressed, apple-polishing teacher's pet who invariably did extra homework, parroted the right answers, made the best grades and seldom participated in any of the rough and tumble, irresponsible activities on the playground (and when he tried it was always in an awkward, studied manner). It is hard to like or feel comfortable with someone like that, and we suspect that part of the President's trouble is that he has had to live with this sort of antipathy most of his life. We also suspect that when Nixon saw the opportunity arise to try again for the Presidency during the 1960s, he was determined, this time, to leave nothing to chance and to put together an organization that could outdo the one that took

his measure—and with more than just “dirty tricks”—in the Kennedy election. The slick combination of money, high-powered advisors, energetic palace-guards and errand boys, dedicated Irish Mafia not only worked famously for Jack Kennedy but their efforts, no matter how questionable or ruthless, were often admired and applauded by most of the press and TV. But for Nixon, imitating New Frontier techniques, something was missing; there was no “charisma,” no Camelot, and the press was not amused. Stuffy, poker-faced Dick was no smiling Jack, and prim Pat was no sexy, swinging Jackie. (We shudder to think of how the media would handle a Nixon-Mitchell-Sinatra stag party at the Carlyle, while Pat was off with jet-set buddies cruising the Bahamas on Bebe’s yacht!)

Exposing the detailed tapes to the public had much the same effect as replaying a men’s locker room bull-session or eavesdropping on the gripe and gossip session of a bunch of beauty-parlor operators. It offended the Puritanical sensibilities of some righteous Republican supporters who, reacting in hypocritical indignation, found it all morally reprehensible; most of the Democrats were smarter and kept their mouths shut. It also gave fresh ammunition to the liberal media, increasing with renewed vigor their efforts to influence public opinion and force resignation. So, as of now, the outcome is uncertain, and whether or not still another storm can be weathered remains to be seen.

Curiously, in the May-June issue of *The Center Magazine*, a publication of the west-coast, ultra-liberal Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, comes an article by Fred Warner Neal, a Center Associate and professor of international relations at Claremont College, entitled: “A Liberal’s Case for Keeping the President.” Neal, formerly an anti-Nixon Republican, and now an anti-Nixon Democrat, considers this administration to be “inept, venal and even disastrous in many ways;” but he feels that Nixon’s tremendous accomplishments in the field of foreign relations, reversing our Cold War policy and working out a détente with the Soviets, are without analogy in American history and far outweigh his deficiencies elsewhere. He suggests that it would be much better to forget about resignation or impeachment, have Congress pass a concurrent resolution of censure against the President and let it go at that. A choice, he says—as in most political questions—between the lesser of two evils: remove Nixon on moral principle and see our new foreign policy go down the drain or keep him in office to ensure its continuance.

Well, who knows the eventual outcome, or the good or bad of it all? In years to come, when all will have passed into history, it may become evident that the present conflict was not one between an outraged public and a stubborn, criminal President but, instead, a contest to determine whether or not the liberal media wields more power than the Presidency, the Congress and the Courts.