

A revealing picture of the American presidency

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The latest batch of White House tape recordings from January and February 1973, released Tuesday by the Nixon Presidential Library, give a taste of the political atmosphere in which Richard M. Nixon conducted the office of the presidency.

One taped discussion is between Nixon and visiting Philippine Foreign Minister Carlos Romulo, held a few months after Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos seized absolute power and dissolved the country's legislature. They discuss the relative merits of democracy and dictatorship.

Romulo says, justifying Marcos' coup, "For a developing society, you need someone with strength." Nixon agrees, adding, "You also need it in Latin America. You need it, for example, in Korea. You're going to need it in Vietnam eventually, you know, the truth is. I understand that."

This exchange summarizes the contempt of Washington for the democratic rights of half a billion people. It justifies the mass repression that was then taking place in South Korea and the Philippines, and under a half-dozen Latin American military dictatorships, and also foreshadows Nixon's role in the September 11, 1973 military coup in Chile which overthrew the reformist Allende regime and established the murderous dictatorship of General Pinochet. It also gives the lie to the pro-war propaganda of the Vietnam era, which presented the US military intervention as a struggle for "democracy" against "communism."

The conversation concludes with Romulo suggesting that the methods of Marcos would serve Nixon well at home. "Mr. President, if you had Marcos over here, your Congress wouldn't be giving you the trouble they're giving you now," the Philippine visitor says. Nixon shares the joke but dismisses his Democratic opponents with contempt. "They've been giving me trouble for four years and we survived it," he says.

A *New York Times* commentary excerpting from the tape transcript, published Sunday, describes the Romulo-Nixon exchange as "a reminder that during the cold war, the United States did not shrink from supporting repressive allies." This language suggests that today, long after the cold war's end,

US policy has changed. Conditions in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Sri Lanka and under numerous African military regimes testify to the contrary.

A second conversation on the January-February 1973 tapes shows Nixon's anti-communist mania. He praises former president Truman for dropping the atomic bomb on Japan, arming right-wing forces in Greece and intervening militarily in Korea. A discussion ensues on whether Truman was right to fire General Douglas MacArthur when he publicly opposed Truman's war policy and demanded an attack on China.

Nixon seems to take both sides in the argument, saying that MacArthur was right on policy, but Truman right in asserting presidential authority. "MacArthur was right in saying bomb across the Yalu," Nixon says, "That was the time to finish the goddamn left-wing, uh, Communists off, but he didn't do it." When aide H. R. Haldeman interjects that it was unclear what to do "given a situation where the president is wrong and the general is right," Nixon responds, "Even when the president is wrong, you cannot have disloyalty."

Then Nixon's personal secretary, Rosemary Woods (of the infamous 18½-minute gap in the Watergate tapes) interjects the following suggestion:

Woods: I wish we could try some of our senators and congressman for treason.

Nixon: Don't worry about that.

Woods: I really do. Some day we'll write them up—

Nixon: The story will be told, Rose, sooner than you think.

It is not clear what action Nixon was referring to, but the comment by Woods reveals the growing anxiety in the White House in the early days of the Watergate scandal. Nor was her view exceptional that political criticism of the White House should be a capital offense.

A conversation with White House aide Charles Colson on January 20, 1973 focuses on the aftermath of the infamous "Christmas bombing" of Hanoi and Haiphong, when Nixon ordered an all-out air assault on the two North Vietnamese cities, with heavy civilian casualties, in order to pressure the

regime to reach a deal in the peace talks going on in Paris.

Nixon characterizes criticism of the bombing by American opponents of the war as “treasonable,” and tells Colson, who was responsible for spearheading “dirty tricks” operations against political enemies, “Your job is to see that, by God, we put it to 'em.” These opponents, Nixon and Colson agree, include “the blacks and the poor” and “the intellectuals.”

Nixon goes on to justify his bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong by citing the mass killing carried out by his predecessors in previous wars—Eisenhower, as the commander of US forces in Europe, in the firebombing of German cities, Truman in the dropping of the atomic bomb, Eisenhower as president in the decimation of North Korean cities.

Another Nixon-Colson conversation on January 22, 1973 follows immediately upon the Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion. Neither Nixon nor Colson (now a Christian fundamentalist and abortion foe) indicated any religious scruples about *Roe v. Wade*. “There are times when abortions are necessary—I know that,” Nixon said. “Suppose you have a black and a white, or a rape.”

It is not a revelation that Nixon was a racial bigot. His presidency was a turning point for the Republican Party, which embraced a “Southern strategy” of exploiting the divisions within the Democratic Party over civil rights and winning control of the South by appealing to racism. Even so, the crudeness of his views can still shock. Six years after the Supreme Court decision in *Loving v. Virginia* which struck down state laws against “miscegenation,” Nixon was comparing interracial sex to rape.

These closed-door discussions graphically reveal the semi-fascistic mentality of the Nixon White House. But the anti-democratic tendencies Nixon embodied have by no means dissipated since his resignation in 1974. The official cover-up of his political crimes began less than a month after his resignation, with his pardon by his unelected successor, Gerald Ford.

The 1980s saw the Iran-Contra affair, which centered on a secret and illegal operation run from the basement of the White House to fund the Contra death squads in Nicaragua. Although President Reagan authorized this operation, in violation of the Boland Amendment, which Congress had passed to ban US aid to the Contras, there was no attempt to pursue impeachment charges against him. Congressional Democrats wrapped up public hearings when they threatened to expose plans that had been drawn up by the Reagan administration for mass repression against Central American immigrants and left-wing forces within the US.

The 1990s saw the right-wing conspiracy to destabilize the Clinton administration, utilizing a sex scandal and spearheaded by a partisan Republican independent counsel.

This culminated in the first-ever impeachment of an elected US president, although Clinton escaped conviction and removal in his Senate trial.

The cowardice of Clinton and the Democrats and their refusal to expose the right-wing plot to topple his administration encouraged the Bush campaign and the Republican Party to steal the 2000 presidential election. This set the stage under George W. Bush for an unprecedented assault on democratic rights, a vast expansion of executive and police powers, and the establishment of the infrastructure for a police state under cover of the “war on terror.”

This attack on democratic processes went hand in hand with a growing concentration of wealth in the hands of a financial aristocracy and an escalation of imperialist military aggression.

Whatever the superficial differences in image and style, all of these reactionary processes are continuing under Obama. His administration has escalated the war in Afghanistan and extended it into Pakistan, and is committed to keeping tens of thousands of US troops in Iraq for years to come. He has defended the Bush administration’s attack on habeas corpus, military tribunals, indefinite detention of alleged terrorists, rendition and domestic spying. His economic policies have focused on protecting and expanding the wealth of the financial elite through government bailouts of the banks, while preparing to slash spending for health care and basic social programs for the working class.

The Nixon tapes must serve as a warning to the working class. It cannot defend its democratic rights through the two capitalist parties or through appeals to the institutions of the capitalist state, but only through its independent mobilization on the basis of a revolutionary socialist and internationalist program.

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