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Nixon Tapes Back to Haunt GOP

Those pernicious, all-hearing Nixon tapes are back again to haunt the GOP. The tapes seem to support the charge by John W. Dean III that in 1972 President Nixon used Gerald Ford to help block a Watergate investigation.

Even more troublesome, we have now established that Nixon purposely altered the tape transcripts to cover up Ford's possible role in stopping the late Rep. Wright Patman (D-Tex.) from investigating Watergate.

Patman was hot on the trail of the Watergate conspiracy before the 1972 election. He discovered, for example, how the Watergate money had been laundered in Mexico. But the White House brought pressure on his House Banking Committee to halt the probe.

Ford has conceded that, as House Republican leader, he opposed the probe. But twice he has sworn that he acted on his own without any pressure from the White House. Former White House counsel Dean has all but called him a liar. Dean now claims that he learned from two White House aides, William Timmons and Richard Cook, that they had consulted with Ford about derailing Patman.

Our investigation doesn't disprove Ford's testimony. But we have positively established that Nixon altered the transcripts in at least eight instances to conceal Ford's possible involvement. In each instance, Nixon appeared to believe that his staff would be in touch with Ford and that Ford would intervene.

On Sept. 15, 1972, for example, a worried Nixon discussed the Patman probe with aides. He wanted the investigation stopped, he told them. Then, referring to Ford, Nixon declared: "Jerry has really got to lead on this."

Nixon was emphatic. He said Ford should be told: "Now goddamnit, get the hell over with this (ending the probe)." To stress the urgency, Nixon added: "I'm getting into this thing."

These statements were picked up by the hidden microphone in the Oval Office. But Nixon later deleted them from the transcript.

At another point, Nixon suggested that Rep. William B. Widnall (R-N.J.), the top Republican on Patman's committee, was too weak to stall the investigation. "Put it down," instructed Nixon, "uh, Jerry should talk to Widnall and, uh, just brace him." This instruction also was deleted from the transcripts.

One of the most significant omissions involved Timmons, whom Dean identified as a go-between with Ford. Nixon said: "The game has to be played awful rough . . . You'll follow through with . . . Who will over there? Who . . . Timmons, or with Ford." This reference to Ford and Timmons also was struck from the transcripts.

On another part of the tape, Nixon questioned whether Ford could "do anything with Patman." Again, Nixon stated that Ford has "got to know" that Nixon personally wanted the probe killed. Dean acknowledged, according to the tapes, that Ford would be advised Nixon was personally behind the request. These embarrassing remarks also were deleted.

There is clear evidence, in short, that Nixon censored the references to Ford from the transcript. This doesn't necessarily mean that Nixon's instructions to his staff were carried out. It is always possible, as Ford insists, that they never spoke to him about the probe. It also should be noted that

Ford had nothing to do with editing the transcripts. It wasn't Ford but Nixon who was responsible for the deletions.

Footnote: Timmons and Cook deny that they talked with Ford about killing the Patman investigation. We have been unable to get any comment from Nixon.

Inside The White House—The Watergate special prosecutor has now cleared President Ford of illegally pocketing or diverting any funds from the maritime unions. As additional evidence that the maritime unions have no hold on him, we have learned that they brought tremendous pressure on him to sign a 1974 bill requiring that a percentage of oil imports be carried on U.S. ships. The unions' friends on Capitol Hill even threatened to hold up Ford legislation if he didn't sign the bill. Nevertheless, the President vetoed the bill.

Not long ago, Transportation Secretary William Coleman marched up to Capitol Hill to plead for minority contractors. He sought legislation to assure that they get at least 15 per cent of the railroad work in the Northeast corridor. But railroad lobbyists quietly spread the word that Coleman was acting on his own, that he didn't speak for the President. When this got back to Ford, he personally sent word to key members of Congress that he backed Coleman 100 per cent.

Teammates of President Ford recall the time that his University of Michigan football team played a game in the South. The opposing team objected to a black player on the Michigan squad. Ford immediately let it be known that he would refuse to play if his black teammate was barred from the game.