

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

Jersey City and the Tapes

8/27/73
JERSEY CITY, N.J.—Among the blue collar workers of President Nixon's new majority, his flat refusal to reveal any part of the conversations surreptitiously taped in his White House office puts him on the wrong side of a decision that threatens a massive change in Watergate's political impact.

The depth of this grave new risk to Mr. Nixon's presidency became dramatically evident in a political scouting trip here by us this week to investigate voter reaction to the Watergate crisis.

By a margin of well over 2-to-1, the voters here told us the presidential tapes should be handed over to investigators. What makes this so important is that we were interviewing in Nixon country: A carefully selected election district composed of white, ethnic workers of lower middle income who voted overwhelmingly for Mr. Nixon last year despite their Democratic heritage.

Of 93 voters we interviewed in a long-established residential area just off Hamilton Park these were the results: 61 said the tapes should be made available to Sen. Sam Ervin's Watergate committee or special prosecutor Archibald Cox; 25 said the President should keep them secret; 7 had no opinion.

The significance of that huge margin against Mr. Nixon's decision not to reveal the tapes can be seen in contrast to other questions asked by us and national political pollster Tully Plesser.

On the question "Do you think less of Richard Nixon because of Watergate

and related events?", the voters split down the middle—46 to 46, with 1 undecided.

Likewise, asked whether the President's "ability to govern" has been weakened as a result of Watergate, only 51, barely over half the total, said "yes."

On question after question, the anti-Nixon reaction, strong as it was, fell far short of the anti-Nixon response on the non-disclosure of the secret tapes. Thus, only 25 of our voters felt the President should resign his office because of Watergate and a mere 16 told us he should be impeached. Another question: "Have you personally lost confidence in the President because of Watergate?" The response: only 44 yes, 41 no, 8 not sure.

In short, the bitter controversy over the tapes has crystallized public opinion against Mr. Nixon more firmly, and on an issue more easily understandable to the average voter, than anything else connected with the Watergate disaster.

Moreover, we found that Mr. Nixon's decision, secret until a former aide spilled it to the Ervin committee July 16, to bug and tape all conversations in his Washington offices was deeply resented. Our voters disapproved of the surreptitious recordings by nearly 4 to 1. The taping question is beginning to transcend all other Watergate issues, to the President's personal disadvantage, as the ridicule in comments to us made clear.

"Why does he hide facts that belong to the people?" an elderly 1972 Nixon voter complained. Said a younger voter. "He shouldn't hold 'em back, he

shouldn't hide nothing at all." This theme was universal among voters who want the tapes made public; they believe the President decided not to reveal them for purposes of his own special interest and protection.

Yet, the anger reflected in these attacks on the President was totally absent when we brought up the possibility of resignation or impeachment. To the contrary, voters who considered impeachment even remotely possible did so with great reluctance, exhibiting deep understanding of how grave a matter is impeachment.

One pro-Nixon 1972 voter who has now turned against him said he was moving reluctantly toward impeachment, but added: "It would be a terrible thing if we had to get rid of a President." Another who said that he had lost "a great deal" of confidence in the President was palpably emotional when asked about the possibility of impeachment: "That would put our country in a very sad state of affairs if a President was ever impeached."

But hostility toward Mr. Nixon because of his decision to keep his tapes secret could quickly cut into that reluctance, overwhelming though it is today, and end his immunity from public pressure to resign or be impeached.

If the tapes do indeed contain facts that would damn the President, he had no alternative. But if his advisers truly counselled withholding the tapes for other reasons—fear of embarrassing innocent third parties or constitutional factors—they will have a lifetime to regret that advice. Such seems to be the lesson of Jersey City.