

LEISURE & ARTS

TV: Eavesdropping on the Presidents

By DOROTHY RABINOWITZ

So far as we know, no voice-activated taping system of the sort operating during the Nixon presidency is now functioning in the White House—more's the pity. Richard Nixon was, to be sure, not the first president to record White House phone calls and meetings; Franklin Roosevelt made infrequent use of a recording device, as did, also, Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower. As A&E's "Investigative Reports" reveals in an intriguing documentary (airing Saturday March 29, 9-11 p.m.), the presidents who used them employed taping systems for the sake of an accurate record and as a defensive measure against misquotation.

Here is Franklin Roosevelt—in what the filmmakers evidently consider a horrifically revealing moment— inveighing against a "damn Jap" demanding America get out of Hawaii. Titled—inevitably—"The Secret White House Tapes," the documentary is nothing if not determined to extract smoking guns, or all possible approximations thereof, from these recordings. This nonsense aside, there is much that is instructive in these fragments interpreted by historians Geoffrey Ward, Stephen Ambrose and Robert Dallek, former government officials and associates of the presidents. Eisenhower, for example, often planned to record meetings and conversations on the Dictabelt system installed for that purpose. He would have done so too, if it weren't for his tendency to forget to turn the switch on. Still, as the president's biographer Stephen Ambrose pointedly notes, Eisenhower always remembered to flip that switch on when meeting with Richard Nixon.

John F. Kennedy, in turn, employed an extensive bugging system, planting microphones in desks, in the walls of the cabinet room, fixtures, coffee tables. Of the 200 hours of conversations thus taped none, of course, equal the drama of those held in mid-October 1962, just after the discovery that the Soviet Union had established missile sites in Cuba. In one of these, Kennedy, Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara consider how, and whether, to strike at the installations—an exchange, heavy with apprehension, in which the participants appear to be talking to themselves. Mr. McNamara is all for taking the launching sites out. To which Rusk responds that the minute the Cuban missiles are launched we are in a general nuclear war. Kennedy observes that it doesn't much matter whether we're blown up by an ICBM coming from the Soviet Union or one from Cuba, 90 miles away.

The atmosphere is no less grim in the president's meeting with the Joint Chiefs, who are unhappy about his proposed blockade of Cuba, which they consider an ineffectual, piecemeal response. When the president leaves the room, the Joint Chiefs feel free to express their fury over the president's plans, which they do in terms too colorful to be printed on these pages. The Chiefs don't know, needless to say, about the recording devices planted under the tables.

Kennedy's successor, Lyndon Johnson—a dedicated recorder—had microphones planted all over the White House, including, it would seem, under the presidential bed. By way of proof the producers provide a film clip of an amused former president, Richard Nixon, recalling his discovery of recording devices while searching under his White House bed for a lost shoe. A highly informed source, Mr.



Lyndon Johnson

Nixon reveals details of Lyndon Johnson's final effort to extract some measure of triumph over Robert Kennedy, whom he considered—not unreasonably—an archenemy who had done all within his power to humiliate Johnson during his tenure as JFK's vice president.

Following Robert Kennedy's announcement that he planned to run for president in 1968, Lyndon Johnson summoned him to the White House. The purpose of the meeting, which Johnson planned to enjoy, was to inform Kennedy that he had no intention of supporting his candidacy—and why. At the end of the confrontation, Johnson settled down, eager to hear the blow-by-blow playback—a pleasure he would be denied. There was no recording, a horrified technician informed the president. The reason, it turned out, was that Johnson's archenemy had taken care to equip himself with a device for scrambling recording devices.

Of the presidential recordings here, none, in fact, have the evocative power of Johnson's—which is saying a good deal considering the fact that this work also covers the Nixon years. There is quite simply nothing in the Nixon tapes—dramatic as they are—equal to the force of personality that emerges from these tapes in which Johnson can be heard making himself clear about what he wants and when he wants it: nothing remotely equal to the threatening assurance with which for example, Johnson demands that a vociferously reluctant Sen. Richard Russell serve

on the Warren Commission. He was going to serve on that commission, be the president's man on it, Johnson informed Russell: "and don't tell me what you can do and you can't do." He wouldn't arrest him or put the FBI on him, the president further assured Russell, but he was going to serve, and Johnson didn't care, he informed Russell, if he had to serve with a Republican, a communist, a Negro or a thug. On this outpouring goes without pause, and no trace of levity—the president is not joking—until Russell wearily gives in.

The president's tactics varied, as protocol required. Another taped phone recording reveals a deeply seductive Lyndon Johnson attempting to persuade a by now aged Harry Truman to fly to Greece for King Paul's funeral. When Truman seems reluctant—and begs time to consult Bess—Johnson reminds him that he needs the best representatives, that those Greek people love Harry Truman, and that his wife, Lady Bird, would make old fashioned for Bess, that the president will send a plane, and that now he will put Lady Bird on the phone. Mrs. Johnson in due course informs Truman, in her inimitably musical fashion, that his presence would make the trip ever so much more significant than it would otherwise be—all of which not surprisingly soon has Truman packing to go to Greece.

It is a mesmerizing scene, like most of those captured on the tapes dealing with Johnson. That's not to say that the Nixon tapes aren't interesting, or that Ronald Reagan's aren't, or that one wouldn't give a lot to know that one of Lyndon Johnson's recording devices was still snuggled under a bed somewhere upstairs at the much trafficked White House.

WALL STREET
JOURNAL

3/17/97