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Eisenhower Secretly Recorded Oval Office Sessions

Reference to FDR as 'Almost an Egomaniac' Revealed on Newly Transcribed Dictabelts

By George Lardner Jr.
Washington Post Staff Writer

President Dwight D. Eisenhower used a secretly installed dictabelt machine to record his Oval Office conversations and, on one recording made public yesterday, described one of his predecessors as somewhat of an "egomaniac."

The discussion, held on Jan. 7, 1955, with then-Sen. Walter George (D-Ga.), chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, was arranged by Eisenhower to talk about congressional efforts to curb his treaty-making powers with a cumbersome constitutional amendment.

Evidently recorded without George's knowledge, the conversation is sometimes difficult to make out, but Eisenhower can be heard clearly in tracing the sour mood about presidential authority to Franklin D. Roosevelt, whom Eisenhower described as "almost an egomaniac in his beliefs."

Old and creased, the dictabelts of that and a few other meetings of his presidency went unnoticed at the Eisenhower library in Abilene, Kan., for more than 40 years, flattened out and



FILE PHOTO

DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER

... more recordings to be released

stuffed into letter-sized envelopes with dates and other notations scribbled by Eisenhower or his secretary, the late Ann Whitman.

Archivists assumed the belts simply contained dictations by Eisenhower, recorded on machines that are

now obsolete. "We thought they were damaged and unplayable," library director Dan Holt said yesterday. But last summer a New York researcher, William S. Doyle, asked to listen to them.

Yesterday, with the help of the Dictaphone Corp. and other experts, the first conversation to be recovered, the meeting between Eisenhower and George, was released here and in Abilene. National Archives officials said the recordings of four other meetings of that era, all that have been found, will be made public shortly on modern-day cassettes.

"The Eisenhower recording system was a closely held secret" when it was in operation, said Doyle, who is working on a book called "The Oval Office Tapes" and a television documentary to be broadcast this month. Whitman, the president's secretary, said in a 1991 oral history that "we didn't want other people to know about it."

It has been known since the 1970s, from Whitman's own notes and summaries, that Eisenhower, like presidents before and after him, recorded at least some of his chats, about 26 by Hunt's estimate. Doyle said there

may have been as many as 100 if the format of Whitman's memos is any guide.

Some of her memos referred to a "gadget" for recording conversations, or a "tape on conversation," or "monitoring." But Hunt said no tapes or tape recording machine—which also may have existed—were ever found. He said no one ever thought of the dictabelts until Doyle made his request.

It isn't clear why Eisenhower recorded the people he did. George was an ally in Eisenhower's resistance to the so-called Bricker amendment, sponsored by Sen. John Bricker (R-Ohio), to preclude treaties from overturning domestic laws. Eisenhower blamed much of the furor on the agreements Roosevelt made in 1945 at Yalta, where he was accused of "selling out" Eastern Europe to the Soviet Union.

"I personally think that there's one president I could name [who] made very great errors," Eisenhower said of FDR without naming him. "But after all, he was . . . almost an egomaniac in his beliefs in his own wisdom." Beyond that, Eisenhower protested, there was nothing in the Bricker amendment that would "guarantee there would be no more Yaltas."

The amendment was defeated in 1954 and a substitute, offered by George, failed by a single vote. Bricker introduced it again in 1955 and Eisenhower seemed perplexed by the "confounded" proposal and the futility of his efforts to talk Bricker out of it.

George told the president he doubted the measure would ever get out of the Senate Judiciary Committee, and Congress adjourned that year without taking any action.

A man with a penchant for monitoring conversations to ensure, as he once wrote, that no details would be forgotten, Eisenhower had his war room at the Pentagon completely wired in the early 1940s. Later, as president of Columbia University, he had his mahogany desk specially equipped with microphones behind special panels. According to a 1982 *Time* magazine article, Eisenhower also had his desk in Paris wired when he went there in 1951 to command NATO forces.

Among others whose conversations Eisenhower recorded in his White House years were Queen Frederika of Greece, C.D. Jackson of *Time* magazine, Gen. Lucius Clay, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and his own vice president, Richard M. Nixon. According to Eisenhower biographer Stephen Ambrose, Eisenhower also recommended to his Cabinet members that they record all their phone calls or at least have them monitored, saying:

"You know, boys, it's a good thing when you're talking to someone you

don't trust to get a record made of it. There are some guys I just don't trust in Washington, and I want to have myself protected so that they can't later report that I said something else."

Eisenhower, Ambrose wrote, "nearly always remembered to turn on the machine when he was talking to Nixon."

Doyle, who has studied presidential taping habits from FDR to Ronald Reagan, also recently confirmed the existence of Reagan tapes at the Reagan library in Simi Valley, Calif. All are still classified, but a list compiled by the library shows that White House assistants in the Situation Room taped a number of Reagan's conversations with heads of state, including British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Syrian president Hafez Assad. They also recorded a Sept. 8, 1983 chat Reagan had with Col. Timothy Geraghty, the commander of the U.S. Marine battalion stationed at the Beirut airport.

Asked whether President Clinton has his head-of-state telephone calls taped, White House deputy press secretary Mary Ellen Glynn said yesterday that he does not, and instead relies on the old-fashioned method of having note-takers listen in on another line. However, she added, "we always record his interviews with journalists."

Staff researcher Barbara J. Saffir contributed to this report.