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Butterfield: Devices Were

Installed for Historical Purposes

Federal Aviation Administration Alexander M. Butterfield, a former White House assistant to H. R. (Bob) Halde- man, testified before the Senate select Watergate Commit- tee yesterday about various listening devices that have re- corded the White House con- versations of President Nixon. Here are excerpts of his tes- timony, with questions asked by the Senate committee's minority (Republican) coun- sel, Frank Thompson.

Thompson: During what period of time were you em- ployed at the White House, Mr. Butterfield?

Butterfield: I was at the White House as a deputy as- sistant to the President from the first day of the Nixon Administration, Jan. 21, 1969, until noon of March 14, 1973 . . .

The staff secretary, who is the day-to-day administrator at the White House, re- ported directly to me. And, of course, I reported to Mr. Haldeman, as did everyone.

In addition to administra- tion, I was responsible for the management and ulti- mate supervision of the of- fice of presidential papers and the office of special files. Both of those offices pertained to the collection of documents which will eventually go to the Nixon library.

Thirdly, I was in charge of security at the White House insofar as liaison with the Secret Service and the Executive Protective Service is concerned and in- sofar as FBI background in- vestigations for prospective Presidential appointees is concerned.

A fourth duty was that I was the secretary to the Cabinet and had that duty not from Jan. 21, 1969, but from November, I believe Nov. 4, 1969, through until the day I departed, March 14 of this year.

I was additionally the lia- ison between the President and the Office of the Presi- dent and all of the various support units. By that I mean the office of the mili- tary assistant to the Presi- dent and the office of White House visitors, again the Se-

cret Service, the Executive Protective Service, the resi- dence staff, Mrs. Nixon's staff—I served as sort of a conduit between all those el- ements and the Office of the President.

Finally, I was in charge of the smooth-running of the President's official day, both in Washington, D.C., and at the western White House in San Clemente . . .

Thompson: Mr. Butter- field, are you aware of the installation of any listening devices in the Oval Office of the President?

Butterfield: I was aware of listening devices, yes sir.

Thompson: When were those devices placed in the Oval Office?

Butterfield: Approxi- mately the summer of 1970. I cannot begin to recall the precise date. My guess, Mr. Thompson, is that the instal- lation was made between— and this is a very rough guess—April or May of 1970 and perhaps the end of the summer or early fall 1970.

Thompson: Are you aware of any devices that were in- stalled in the Executive Of- fice Building office of the President?

Butterfield: . . . They were installed at the same time.

Thompson: Would you tell us a little bit about how those devices worked, how they were activated, for example?

Butterfield: I dont have the technical knowledge, but I will tell you what I know about how those devices

were triggered. They were installed, of course, for his- torical purposes, to record the President's business and they were installed in his two offices, the Oval Office and the EOB office. Within the west wing of the White House, there are several . . . presidential locator boxes. These are square boxes ap- proximately ten by ten inches, and on them are sev- eral locations, about seven locations, which would tell where the President might be at any time . . .

Locations such as the resi- dence—that is one of them; the south grounds is another; Oval Office is another; EOB office is still another; west wing, meaning west wing of the White House, is another . . . east wing is still another and I think that covers all of the locations indicated on the box.

When the President moves from his Oval Office, for instance, to his Execu- tive Office Building office and he departs the west wing and crosses the street, it is my understanding that the Secret Service agents, members of the executive protective division, who cover him . . . when he moves across the street, one of them covers the central location, which may be the switchboard under the east wing, or it may be the Ser- vet Service command post, I don't know . . .

It says the President is leaving the west wing and going to the EOB office. They would know this. And the little light moves from the Oval Office to EOB of- fice. It doesn't actually move the EOB office until



By Frank Johnston—The Washington Post

Chairman Sam Ervin concentrates on testimony at Watergate hearings.

the President actually enters the EOB office.

As that light moves, there is a tie-in audio signal so that if one is preoccupied, as I might be, I realize that the locator box is indicating a change in the President's location and that kind of information was important to me. My office was located immediately adjacent to the President's Oval Office on the west side. My duties involved going in and out frequently and working di-

rectly with the President.

Mr. Steve Bull, who at that time worked on the other side of the President, on the east side of the Oval Office, had one of these locator boxes, and Mr. Haldeman had a third . . . There was a fourth in Mr. (Dwight L.) Chapins office . . .

We were probably the four who would be the most concerned, or at least most immediately concerned with the President's whereabouts and the fact that he was

changing locations.

In that the Oval Office and the Executive Office Building office were indicated on this locator box, the installation was installed in such a way that when the light was on "Oval Office," the taping device was at least triggered. It was not operating, but it was triggered—it was spring-loaded, if you will, then it was voice-actuated.

So when the light was on "Oval Office," in the Oval Office and in the Oval Office only, the taping device was spring-loaded to a voice-actuating situation.

When the President went to the EOB office, the EOB light was on. In the EOB office, there was the same arrangement.

In those two offices, the arrangement was the same and the taping picked up all conversations or all noise in those two offices when the light was at those positions.

Thompson: . . . What about the Cabinet room? Was there a taping device in the Cabinet room?

Butterfield: Yes, sir, there was.

Thompson: Was it activated in the same way?

Butterfield: No, sir, it was not, and my guess is, and it is only my guess, is because there was no Cabinet room location per se on the locator box. There was only a west wing indication. When the light was on west wing that meant the President was in one of two places, the Cabinet room or the barber-shop. When he went into the Cabinet room the light went to west wing . . .

To insure the recording of business conversations in the Cabinet room a manual installation was made . . .

Thompson: There were buttons on the desk in the Cabinet room there that activated that device?

Butterfield: There were two buttons . . .

There was an off-on button, one said "Haldeman" and one that said "Butterfield" that was on and off respectively, and one on my telephone.

Thompson: How was the device usually activated—by the buttons or by your telephone activator?

Butterfield: To my knowledge, the President never did pay any attention to the buttons at the Cabinet table. It was activated, the button on my telephone, by me.

Thompson: So far as the

Oval Office and the EOB office is concerned, would it be your testimony that the device would pick up any and all conversations no matter where the conversations took place in the room and no matter how soft the conversations might have been?

Butterfield: Yes, sir . . .

Thompson: Was it a little more difficult to pick up in the Cabinet room?

Butterfield: Yes, sir, it was a great deal more difficult to pick up in the Cabinet room.

Butterfield then testified that there were also recording devices on the telephones on President Nixon's desks in the Oval Office and Lincoln Sitting Room of the White House, the President's office in the Executive Office Building, and the President's study in the Aspen Cabin at Camp David.

Thompson: It is my understanding this (Aspen) cabin was sometimes used by foreign dignitaries, was the device still present during those periods of time?

Butterfield: No, sir, the device was removed prior to occupancy by chiefs of state,

heads of government and other foreign dignitaries.

Thompson: All right. Would you state who installed these devices, all of these devices, so far as you know?

Butterfield: . . . The Secret Service. The Technical Security Division of the Secret Service.

Thompson: Would you state why, as far as your understanding is concerned, these devices were installed in these rooms?

Butterfield: There was no doubt in my mind they were installed to record things for posterity, for the Nixon library. The President was very conscious of that kind of thing. We had quite an elaborate setup at the White House for the collection and preservation of documents, and of things which transpired in the way of business of state.

Thompson: On whose authority were they installed, Mr. Butterfield?

Butterfield: On the President's authority by way of Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Higby . . .

Mr. Haldeman instructed

Mr. Higby to tell me and as I said earlier, I was the liaison with the Secret Service and it would be proper for me to give the instruction to the Secret Service.

Thompson: During your tenure at the White House as far as your own knowledge is concerned, who else knew about the presence of these recording devices?

Butterfield: The President, Mr. Haldeman, Mr. Higby, and I, plus the Secret Service people . . .

When I departed — there was one other, my secretary knew also, at this time, although she was not informed early on. She was informed much later because there were a number of occasions on which I just could not be there to press this button and I briefed her and asked her to do it for me but she does not, did not, have any idea of the extent of this. I think she was only aware of the Cabinet room. Perhaps she was aware of the Oval office. When I departed I was authorized to brief Steve Bull, who now occupies that office, and now has many of



By Frank Johnston—The Washington Post

Sen. Edward J. Gurney chats with Fred Thompson, counsel for the minority on the Senate Watergate committee.

the responsibilities that I had.

General Haig, who is sitting at Mr. Haldeman's desk, no sir, and I believe that is all, sir.

Thompson: As far as you know, did Mr. (John D.) Ehrlichman or Mr. John W.) Dean know about the existence of the presence of those devices?

Butterfield: It would be very unlikely. My guess is they definitely did not know.

Thompson: Where were the tapes of those conversations kept, maintained?

Butterfield: I cannot say where. I am quite sure in the Executive Office Building in some closets or cupboards or files which are maintained by the Technical Security Division of the U.S. Secret Service.

Thompson: Were these tapes checked periodically?

Butterfield: Yes, they were checked at least daily . . . I think some were used more frequently than others. The Secret Service knew this, they made sure that they were checked periodically and sufficiently.

Thompson: Do you know how many conversations or how many days would be represented on one particular tape?

Butterfield: No, sir, I do not. There were a number of days during which the President was not at the White House, so, or the business was light. Other days that business was exceedingly heavy, I could not say.

Thompson: Did you ever hear any of these tapes being played?

Butterfield: Yes, sir, I did. It was my duty to insure that the equipment was working properly. I checked the Oval Office, EOB office, Cabinet room tapes several times and, as I told you earlier, it was always working properly in the Oval Office and EOB office. It was very, very difficult to pick up conversation in the Cabinet room and I never did check any of the telephones.

Thompson: Were any of these tapes ever transcribed, reduced to writing or type-written paper, so far as you know?

Butterfield: Too my recollection, no.

Thompson: Was there

ever any discussion of transcribing any of these tapes?

Butterfield: To my recollection, no, sir.

Thompson: You mentioned they were for historical purposes. Was there ever any discussion about going ahead and catching up on the tapes that you had previously recorded?

Butterfield: Well, by discussion I was thinking of discussion by others. On at least one occasion, not necessarily in a serious vein but in very off hand rather casual conversation to Mr. Haldeman, I did say that we should go ahead and get a leg up on the transcribing of these tapes in that the storage problem was getting to be quite fantastic, and eventually they had to be transcribed for the Nixon library and it was my suggestion that we get four or five illustrious, worthy secretaries and begin the typing. So that at the end of the Nixon term we would at least have a year or a year and a half or two years out of the way.

Thompson: Mr. Butterfield, as far as you know from your own personal knowledge, from 1970 then until the present time all of the President's conversations in the offices mentioned and on the telephones mentioned, were recorded as far as you know?

Butterfield: That is correct, until I left. Someone could have taken the equipment out but until the day I left I am sure I would have been notified.

Thompson: And as far as you know, those tapes are still available?

Butterfield: As far as I know, but I have been away for four months, sir.

The committee's majority (Democratic) counsel Sam Dash: All right. Now, I am not sure whether you testified to this, but you tested the system at one point, did you not?

Butterfield: Yes sir.

Dash: To see if the Oval Office or the EOB Office, that you could pick up sound even though it was hardly audible when a sound was made in the room?

Butterfield: Yes.

Dash: What was the result of your test?

Butterfield: The result was that voices, conversa-

tions, were picked up very well, very clearly.

Dash: Even if their was a whisper.

Butterfield: In either the Oval Office or the Executive Office Building. I can't tell you about a whisper. I just don't know. But it would appear that even low tones were picked up well.

In the Cabinet Room, some voices, those who spoke up quite loudly, could be heard. Anyone who had the habit of speaking softly could not be heard very well at all. In fact, you just, you could not begin to get all of, most of the conversations.

Dash: Now, with regard to the telephone taps, they were operated, were they not, by as soon as the President, who may have used his telephone, lifted up his telephone and engaged in a conversation or received a conversation on his President's phone, the recording device began to record the telephone conversation.

Butterfield: That is my understanding, Mr. Dash, but I lack all of the technical knowledge of the telephone recording device.

Dash: But so far as you know, all telephone calls were also recorded.

Butterfield: From the President's office telephone on his desk in the Oval Office.

Dash: Yes.

Butterfield: And his regular office phone in the Executive Office Building, and the desk telephone in his study at Camp David and his telephone in the Lincoln sitting room—those four phones.

Dash: Just one last question. If one were therefore to reconstruct the conversations at any particular date, what would be the best way to reconstruct those conversations, Mr. Butterfield, in the President's Oval Office?

Butterfield: Well, in the obvious manner, Mr. Dash—to obtain the tape and play it.

Sen. (Joseph) Montoya (D-N.M.): Now, is there any possibility that the tapes which were collected, that some of them could be missing or could have been destroyed?

Butterfield: Not to my knowledge. There shouldn't be. The Secret Service are highly trustworthy. It was their responsibility to

change the tapes and to store—and to mark the tapes and to store them.

Montoya: Who had responsibility for the storage, for the removal and the storage, of these tapes besides yourself?

Butterfield: Well, I ultimately, but the director of the technical Security Division was given that responsibility by me, and he carried it out.

Montoya: Was he the only one besides yourself?

Butterfield: He and those who worked for him.

Montoya: Did Mr. Ehrlichman or Mr. Haldeman or anyone else who worked for the President have authority to go into this particular room where the tapes were stored?

Butterfield: Mr. Haldeman had authority to do anything in the White House, sir, in that he was in effect the chief of the staff. It would be very unlikely for him to do that. He entrusted the responsibility to me, Mr. Ehrlichman, to the best of my knowledge, and I feel quite certain of this, knew nothing about the tapes.

Montoya: . . . And you state that the tapes were primarily to record conversations within these particular offices so that we could preserve history for posterity?

Butterfield: Yes, there really is no question in my mind about it, Senator Montoya. That was often on the President's mind and, as I said, he was very conscious of our having a good system for collecting the things which transpired with regard to the affairs of state.

Montoya: Then why, Mr. Butterfield, wasn't anybody recording history at Key Biscayne or at San Clemente or at other places.

Why was that gap, why the gap there?

Butterfield: I can't answer that question except that when the President did go to Key Biscayne and to Camp David he was going principally for the reason of resting and relaxing. These are resorts. The western White House admittedly is truly a western White House. It is the western extension . . . I cannot answer your question with regard to

it. It is a gap.

Sen. (Lowell) Weicker (R-Conn.): Why do you think these systems were installed in 1970? If in fact it was installed for historical purposes, would it not have made a great deal of sense to have this installed at the outset of the administration?

Butterfield: It would have made a great deal of sense but I am sure it was not thought of. I am sure I speak for other people when I say that, but I am certain that was the reason.

A great many systems evolved. We had a system for preserving records of what transpired in the President's meetings. These memoranda were called "Memoranda for the President's File."

I spoke . . . about a procedure for having a staff member sit in (and take notes) on all calls on the President — the President was never alone with anyone who might call on him. It might be his old Duke Law School professor, but someone would sit in on that meeting and preferably make mental notes of what transpired, because actually writing notes had a tendency of inhibiting the guest, and we did not want to do that.

The point I am making is that as much was remembered and as much was recorded, at least mentally, as possible during the meetings and afterwards spit out into a dictating machine and written up in any manner whatsoever. We did not care about punctuation, we did not care about grammar, we just wanted the substance of what transpired in that meeting for a special file, which was called Memo-

randa for the President's File.

We did not think of that (making sound recordings) at the outset of the administration. And I think it was — I think we were about into the first year. It was roughly January or February of 1970 when we began that procedure. So it was just a case of evolution, sir.

Sen. (Sam) Ervin (D-N.C.): The chair has received a letter from Mr. J. Fred Buzhardt, counsel for the President, dated July 16, 1973, reading as follows:

"Dear Mr. Chairman:

"This letter is to confirm the fact stated to your committee today by Mr. Alexander Butterfield that the President's meetings and conversations in the White House have been recorded since the spring of 1971. I am advised that this system, which is still in use, is similar to that employed by the last administration, which discontinued from 1969 until the spring of 1971. A more detailed statement concerning these procedures will be furnished to the committee shortly.

"Sincerely," signed "Fred Buzhardt."

Butterfield: Thank you, sir. I will be the first to agree with Mr. Buzhardt. I only guessed at the time. That is pretty good evidence, I think, of how fuzzy one's recollections can be to be off a full year, but if they say the spring of '71, obviously, that has been checked with the Secret Service, who would have a record, and I stand corrected on that point.