

... 'A Danger to Security'

Do we dare believe him now about the tapes? I don't mean that business about the crucial conversation with Mitchell being made "from an extension" phone "not hooked into the system" or the critical conversation with John Dean being lost due to a "malfunction."

Of course we don't dare believe that. I don't think we're even expected to.

But do we dare believe that the tape recordings in question really don't exist?

Let me reveal the depths of my skepticism. The American people, reacting to the shock of the suddenly-missing tapes, following on the shock of the Weekend That Was, are certain to escalate the demand for impeachment of the President.

The public, the politicians, the investigators and the commentators in the press will be absolutely certain that the Mitchell and Dean tapes contained the rope that would have hanged Richard Nixon. His destruction of them (and that is how we will surely view it) is proof of his guilt and, therefore, a far more convincing ground for his impeachment than the ITT scandal, the dairy deal and the Cox sacking combined.

The letters and telegrams will flood the White House and the Congress pointing out that the people aren't so stupid as to believe that two crucial tapes just happened to have become retroactively non-existent.

We'll all recall that the President wanted to be clear in his mind as to what bearing the tapes may have had

on the Watergate investigation, which is why he asked former White House honcho H.R. Haldeman to listen to some of them; we'll say that surely the President must have thought the Mitchell and Dean tapes important to that review. So, we'll say, how come we're just now learning that the tapes never existed?

The conclusion will be inescapable, and impeachment will become not just possible but extremely probable.

Now suppose that just at that point, some White House aide suddenly found the missing tapes — the *real* tapes — and that they were relatively innocent. Not *too* innocent, mind you, for that would render them unbelievable. But suppose they contained only some unexpectedly salty language, some unflattering characterizations of important people, and some ambiguous implications of presidential involvement in the Watergate cover-up?

What would be the result? Assuming he could make us believe the tapes were authentic, he would have exonerated himself, at least enough to avert impeachment.

I'm not saying that the President will try to pull such a rabbit out of the hat. I'm saying that it is dangerous to preclude the possibility. The main reason I bring it up at all is that to say publicly that it could happen may serve to keep it from happening.

The real effect of this latest bombshell, however, goes beyond such Machiavellian machinations. It is that the people will no longer believe *anything* that comes out of the White House. There has been too much of that trend already. The Mideast crisis, for instance, may have been real enough to have landed us in a nuclear war. But how many people refused to believe there was any Mideast crisis at all?

Each new insult to the public intelligence will make it harder for us to believe anything the President is saying, even when our very survival may depend on taking him seriously.

President Nixon, thus, is no longer just an incipient tyrant, flouter of the Constitution and criminal suspect. He is a clear and present danger to our very security. I suppose one could say that if the danger lies in our not believing him, then we could cure it by believing him. It's not that easy, though. By misleading us so often when it has suited his purposes, he has made it impossible for us to believe him, even when it would suit ours.

There is a way out, and it's prelude has been uttered by Richard Nixon himself:

"I shall not attempt to minimize the impact of the profound shocks we experienced in this fateful year . . . This is no time for taking refuge in comforting self-delusions. America is in more trouble, in more places, than ever before in its history.

"Now is the time, I firmly believe, for facing the truth, for seeing it clearly and speaking it plainly."

He said that as a candidate for the presidency, back on July 6, 1968.

But wouldn't it make a lovely beginning for a resignation speech?