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Turning Over the Tapes: Another

Funny how your words come back to make you look silly. Last September, for instance, when the President was insisting that "there is nothing whatever in the tapes that is inconsistent" with his earlier accounts of White House conversations on Watergate, his is what I had to say:

"I believe him for a number of reasons, one of which is that he has had me to have the tapes 'neutered,' but the most persuasive being that he knew it all times that he was being taped.

"And while it may be that he elicited some damning statements from some of his subordinates, or perhaps even gave some veiled hints about what he wanted them to do, it is insane to suppose that he deliberately went on record as a participant in a criminal conspiracy to obstruct justice."

With that as a measure of my infallibility, let me hit you with another theory of mine. (It seems clear that some theory other than the official one is needed to explain some of the funny things-on with the tapes.)

Maybe it was nothing more than bad judgment that the tapes weren't destroyed within hours of Alexander Butterfield's revelation that they existed. The President would have had a plausible explanation for destroying them: The need to reassure foreign diplomats and heads of state that their private conversations with him would remain forever confidential.

But that's the sort of thing you have to do quickly or you can't do it at all. He didn't do it quickly.

Now, just for the sake of the mental exercise, suppose that the President and his former chief of staff H.R. Haldeman worked out a scenario that went something like this:

Suppose they decided that the tapes could conceivably come in handy later on—for instance, to discredit John Dean who hadn't known he was on record. It could have been a devastating coup if the White House had been able to whip out a recording that proved Dean a liar, with Dean's own voice.

The only problem would have been that the President and Haldeman were on the tapes as well and that they might have severely embarrassed themselves in an effort to knock the tops from under Dean.

Now suppose that the President and his most trusted aide decided to listen to the key tapes to see just how embarrassing they might be, and suppose that they found them to be simply too embarrassing to use—in their present form.

So what do they do? It might occur to them to see whether they couldn't pull off a little editing job. Suppose, for openers, they tried to doctor the recording of the first post-burglary conversation with former Attorney General John Mitchell.

Mitchell, remember, is the guy who has been accused of authorizing the series of operations that included Watergate. Suppose that Haldeman and the President—without Mitchell's knowledge or cooperation—tried to dub in

the President's end of the conversation, to make him appear more "isolated" than he really was. And suppose they botched the job so badly that they had to throw the entire tape away.

Perhaps it occurred to them that they had better try something a bit less ambitious. It's pretty tricky stuff to dub in half of a conversation, but surely they could re-do the crucial segment of the June 20, 1972, tape that included only the chief and his chief aide.

Suppose they tried it repeatedly—say five to nine times—and still couldn't make it come out sounding authentic. Now they're stuck; they can't come up with a convincing substitute conversation and, obviously,

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they can't put back the original one—and probably wouldn't dare even if they could.

So they fight to hold on to the two experimental tapes for as long as they can, refusing requests, denying subpoenas and—finally—firing Archibald Cox and very nearly bringing down the government.

All to no avail. The tapes have to be produced. Well, what about verified transcripts? No, the tapes themselves.

Well, son of a gun, you know that Mitchell tape never existed in the first place. And the Nixon-Haldeman tape? Oh, it's right here, except, of course, for the only part of it that matters. Sinister forces seem to have got to that part. All 18½ minutes.

So you've got a better theory?