

A Skeptical Reaction on Capitol Hill

Washington

Reaction to the White House statement that two key Watergate tapes were missing ranged from skepticism and incredulity to caution on Capitol Hill yesterday.

Senator Sam J. Ervin, chairman of the Senate Watergate committee told reporters that he had been assured by the White House as recently as October 19 that all nine tapes sought by his committee for their investigation were complete.

Some Republicans expressed surprise and said that the disclosure had shifted the burden of proof to the White House.

Senator James L. Buckley (Rep.-N.Y.), was one who said that the disclosures had "dramatically shifted the burden of the proof."

"As of this moment, President Nixon has the clear burden of satisfying the American people that he has been speaking the truth," Buckley said in a statement. "If he fails in this then we are faced with a political crisis of the most profoundly disturbing proportions."

Another Republican, Senator Mike O. Hatfield of Oregon said in a statement:

"The startling revelation that certain key tapes of the President's conversations do not exist — the very tapes

Back Page Col. 1

REACTION

From Page 1

that have been fought over to the brink of a constitutional crisis — dramatically escalates the problems of the administration's credibility."

Referring to statements by J. Fred Buzhardt Jr., a White House lawyer, that the Nixon-Mitchell conversation was not recorded and that the Nixon-Dean conversation did not exist on tape because of a malfunction or basic inadequacy in the system, Senator Lowell P. Weicker Jr., (Rep.-Conn.) commented that "we all presume that what Mr. Buzhardt has stated is the truth."

"Without question," continued Weicker, a member of the Watergate committee, "these two tapes are extremely important and point up the necessity of having independent investigative bodies. It is obviously the duty of the Senate committee to pin down the facts that allegedly were contained in those two tapes."

DOUBTS

Senator Herman E. Talmadge, (Dem.-Ga.) also a member of the Watergate committee, was less willing to say he accepted the word of the White House.

He said: "the announcement by the President that the tapes of conversations with former Attorney General Mitchell and former White House counsel Dean are nonexistent will create further doubts in the minds

of the public about the President's credibility."

Republicans in Congress appeared willing to give the President the benefit of the doubt.

"This machine age isn't always perfect," said Senator Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania, the Republican leader in the Senate.

And Senator Marlow Cook (Rep.-Ky.) said without elaboration: "I think that's great."

SAXBE

Senator William B. Saxbe, the Ohio Republican who is considered likely to be nominated as the next attorney general, "does not know much about it," according to a spokesman. "This is a technical problem and technicians will have to tell us what happened," the spokesman added.

Representative Robert F. Drinan (Dem.-Mass.), a member of the House Judiciary Committee, which is looking into the possibility of impeaching the President, commented that the White House explanation is "hard to believe."

Drinan said that the question of whether others took the tapes, perhaps former White House aides H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman, is one that needs investigating.

Senator Hubert H. Humphrey (Dem.-Minn.), who lost the presidency to Mr. Nixon in 1968, called the latest White House statement "incredible."

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