

Skepticism and Caution Are Voiced in Congress

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 31—Reaction on Capitol Hill tonight to the White House statement that two key Watergate conversations had not been recorded ranged from skepticism

and incredulity to caution. Senator Sam J. Ervin Jr., the chairman of the Senate Watergate committee, told reporters that he had been assured by the White House as late as Oct. 19 that all nine tapes sought by his committee for their investigation were intact.

Republican members of Congress expressed surprise and said that the disclosure had shifted the burden of proof to the White House.

Senator James L. Buckley, Conservative-Republican of New York, 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," Mr. Buckley said in a statement. "If he fails in this then we are faced with a

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political crisis of the most profoundly disturbing proportions."

Another Republican, Senator Mark 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 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., the White House lawyer, that a conversation with former Attorney General John Mitchell, was not recorded and that a conversation with John W. Dean 3d, former White House counsel, did not exist on tape because of a malfunction or basic inadequacy in the system, Senator Lowell P. Weicker Jr. commented that "We all presume that what Mr. Buzhardt has stated is the truth."

"Without question," continued the Connecticut Republican, who is 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 fact that allegedly were contained in those two tapes."

Senator Herman E. Talmadge Democrat of Georgia, who is also on the Watergate committee, was less willing to accept 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."

Senator Howard H. Baker Jr. of Tennessee, the ranking Republican on the committee, had no immediate comment. Neither did Senator Daniel K. Inouye, Democrat of Hawaii, another committee member, who said "I have not heard anything official."

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.

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

But raised eyebrows were a more common reaction by members of Congress added to the White House declaration.

Senator Stuart Symington, Democrat of Missouri said: "As Bob Kerr [the late Democratic Senator from Oklahoma] used to say, 'I thought I had seen and heard everything and I've been to the Dallas fair twice.'"

The Rev. Robert F. Drinan, Democrat of Massachusetts, 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." Father Drinan said that the question of whether others might have taken the tapes, perhaps H. R. Haldeman or John D. Ehrlich-

man, former top White House officials, should be investigated.

Senator Hubert H. Humphrey, Democrat of Minnesota, who lost the Presidency to Mr. Nixon in 1968, called the latest White House statement "incredible."

"Surely the President and his counsel must have known the situation during all of the discussions with the courts and with the Senate committee," Senator Humphrey said in a statement. "This doesn't have the characteristic of a recent discovery. The public is fed up with this sort of business."