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Wonders of Watergate do not cease. Now the investigating senators have stumbled on to the ultimate witness—the one who can reliably sort out the conflicting charges, reconcile all the confusion and contradiction, save the President or maybe sink him.

It's not John Dean or John Mitchell, not Haldeman or Ehrlichman, not even President Nixon himself. In the search for truth, they have all been upstaged, appropriately enough, by an electronic gizmo—a tape recorder that faithfully eavesdropped on all presidential conversations.

If the White House will turn loose the spools, they could answer countless questions surrounding what the President knew about Watergate and when, which has become the principal issue of the Senate investigation.

Samuel Dash, the committee's chief counsel, smiled like a cat licking canary feathers from his mouth. "We now know there's a complete record of all these meetings," Dash said. "I don't think you have to draw a line and add it up."

The startling revelation that the Oval Office has big ears was popped out yesterday by a reluctant White House alumnus named Alexander Butterfield, who used to arrange for security and historical archives, among other matters, when he was a deputy assistant to the President.

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**SCENE, From A1**

Butterfield, who moved this year to a more tranquil setting as head of the Federal Aviation Administration, put the best construction on it, for the President's sake. But no one outside the White House really knows at this point what impact this secret archive will have on the history of the Nixon years.

"This matter which we have discussed here today," Butterfield said with hope in his voice, "is the basis on which the President plans to present his own defense. . . I believe, of course, that the President is innocent."

But why should the White House wire him for sound, anyway?

"There was no doubt in my mind," said Butterfield, "they were installed to record things for posterity."

Somewhere in a closet or cupboard in the Executive Office Building, Butterfield surmised, the Secret Service technical men have stacks of daily tapes on file, recorded by voice-activated machines in the Oval Office and in the President's office in the EOB next door. There also should be automatic recordings from the President's phones plus a manually-operated machine in the Cabinet meeting room.

The implication of Butterfield's remarks was that the White House strategy has been like "sand-bagging" in a poker game — hold back the taped evidence until the last Watergate accusation was in, then reveal it as a devastating rebuttal. He expressed the hope that it was not his lot to blow the President's game plan.

His supposition that the tapes will clear the President isn't established yet.



The three Republican members of the Senate Watergate committee put their heads together before the open-

ing of the hearings yesterday. From left, Sens. Weicker, Baker and Gurney hold a short minority conference.

By Frank Johnston—The Washington Post



Certainly, the White House passed up every opportunity to reveal their existence which the Senate committee uncovered through a combination of happenstance and good questioning.

Butterfield was called in for an interview with the Senate committee staff last Friday, a routine exercise since his name has never been implicated in the conspiracy to cover up the illegal espionage of Democrats. But Butterfield's office during his four-year tenure at the White House was right next to the Oval Office and he often dealt with principal figures in the case.

"We were doing a complete proximity investigation of anybody who had anything to do with Halde- man, Ehlichman, Dean," Dash explained afterwards. "That's the only way you get anything — by going over everybody."

Even so, the results were fortuitous. Donald Sanders, an ex-FBI man who has served on the House Internal Security Committee and is now a GOP staff member of the Watergate committee, said he casually asked Butterfield about tape-recorded conversations in the White House.

Sanders said he was fishing, following the allusions which former White House Counsel John Dean made to the possibility that his crucial meeting on April 15 with Mr. Nixon had been recorded. "I didn't expect the answer I got," said Sanders.

Butterfield explained to the committee yesterday that he assumed that others from the White House had previously revealed the tape recordings in their interviews with the Senate investigators, namely, former

chief of staff H. R. Halde- man and his aide, Laurence Higby. Dash said, however, that when those two men were asked about any documentary evidence that might clear up conflicting testimony they did not mention that recordings were made.

After Butterfield's private statement on Friday, Dash said the committee sought out other immediate testimony from the White House for confirmation. He prepared subpoenas, he said, for Gen. Alexander M. Haig Jr., the new chief of staff, and Steve Bull, who succeeded Butterfield, and Higby.

But, Dash said, the White House informed him yesterday morning that "it would not be necessary to call all these people to corroborate something they are now willing to admit."

Dash, who as a law professor specialized in the area of electronic surveillance, noted that secretly recording a conversation is legal

so long as one participant knows that the tape is being made. Recording telephone conversations without permission from both parties is another matter, he said. In a couple of states, it is against the law. The Federal Communications Commission, Dash said, has a "tariff regulation" prohibiting phone recordings without a beeper signal. But that's not a crime, he emphasized. The worst that could happen to someone, Dash said, is removal of their phone.

The central question, however, is what the tapes could tell the nation about presidential behavior—the potential for clearing up so many mysteries, half-forgotten conversations, damaging innuendos.

"I'd be delighted," the chief investigator said, "if the ultimate resolution of this investigation is that the President wasn't involved . . . I'd like to see the tapes and honestly hope that they would exonerate the President."