

JUL 19 1973

The Monster With Total Recall

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, July 18—Let's see what happens if we give the President the benefit of the doubt on his decision two years ago to create The Monster With Total Recall.

"Mr. President," Bob Haldeman or somebody could have said, "you're entering a period in which your Chinese and Soviet initiatives are coming to a head. I'll be making notes, and Henry will be making notes, but there will be too much going on to record the decision-making process for posterity, especially about the formation of foreign policy.

"History will be the loser—and let's face it, most historians will do their best to minimize your role in these events. Besides, the Safire types say we don't recognize a good anecdote if it hits us in the head. So let's just run a tape on everything that happens in any of your offices."

"I dunno," the President could have said. "It may not be fair to the people who come in here thinking they can talk in confidence. On the other hand, there's a third party like you always sitting in anyway."

"You would never betray a confidence," insists the seller of the plan. "We would have complete control of the tapes, and nobody would know of their existence. We'd have the Secret Service do it just to be sure the tape is never tampered with."

"It would help in the writing of memoirs," the President admits. "It took a lot of time, you know, to reconstruct events for 'Six Crises.'"

"The tape would be strictly private source material for you. You could still talk frankly, or cuss, and just be yourself—because the tapes would be buried in the oral history section of the Nixon Library, and after you've used them for memoirs you could have them locked up for fifty years, so no living person would ever be embarrassed."

"But if it got out we were taping everything," the President says, "we'd be criticized, though of course I would not be the first President to do it. Foreign visitors think we're eavesdropping anyway—they do it to us over there. And just about everybody in Government has a secretary on a 'dead key' making notes when I call."

"Not only is there precedent going back to F.D.R.," the seller presses, "but you'll have a helluva time listening to the tapes privately in your old age."

"Let's do it," the President says. "Hold it to a need-to-know basis. No discrimination—keep the activation of

ESSAY

the recorders out of our hands entirely. It'll serve the truth, serve history, serve the country, and embarrass nobody."

And so the President, with honorable intent, proceeds to make a horrendous blunder.

Turning the "presence of the President" into a movable feast of snooping profoundly offends and saddens those, like this writer, who have long espoused—with Richard Nixon—the right of privacy, and the cause of individual liberty against unnecessary Government intrusion.

In creating The Monster, the President was not betrayed, ill-advised, or badly served—Richard Nixon's own judgment was bad, and in this case he deserves the heat he gets.

"You do not build confidence," President Nixon once said, "by breaking confidences." When Mr. Nixon caused a switch to be flicked that turned a confessional into a secret broadcasting booth, he let down his visitors, his aides and his principles. On the President's orders, even the "Berlin Wall" had ears.

Presidents set examples. When a President has an inspiring family life, as Mr. Nixon does, that is good for American family life; when the President comports himself abroad with dignity and diligence, as Mr. Nixon does, that reflects well on all Americans.

But when the President walks around with an invisible Recording Angel on his shoulder, he suggests that it is permissible for businessmen and labor leaders, husbands and wives, reporters and sources, to secretly tape each other's conversations as well. That's setting a terrible example.

Public exposure has breathed premature life into The Monster With Total Recall. Posterity is upon us: How can the President emerge neither impeached nor impaired?

The President should let his Monster's voice be heard, in all its ambiguity, just once, in a non-Congressional forum. That would settle nothing, since those longing for a guilty President will claim the tape was tampered with; but it would be a constructive form of penance for the sin of contributing to the eavesdropping epidemic.

Then, to re-establish the confidentiality of the Presidency, Mr. Nixon should drive a stake through The Monster's heart in a public bonfire of tapes on the White House lawn.