

Withholding the Tapes

WASHINGTON — I recently returned from two African countries, Mali and Niger, where millions of people are fighting off possible famine. U.S. assistance and leadership are crucial, but we have no ambassador in either country — because the White House is so preoccupied with Watergate that the President can't seem to get around to naming his envoys.

The simple reality is that neither the Congress, the press nor the public is going to ignore Watergate until it feels it has gotten the truth, and the President cannot ignore Watergate as long as he knows he is suspected of continuing a coverup of the coverup of crimes in which he was involved.

MR. NIXON IS, in fact, the one man on earth with information that might produce a quick conclusion to the Watergate mess. He has the tape recordings which, made public, might establish beyond even the doubts of his enemies that the President is simply the victim of misplaced trust in "overenthusiastic" aides.

But Mr. Nixon continues to cloak those tapes in the dubious argument that to release them would "cripple succeeding Presidents."

Why does the President assume that succeeding Presidents will secretly tape-record all their discussions, even with aides involved in felonies? Why does he assume succeeding Presidents will surround themselves with aides who commit perjury, conspire to commit high crimes, obstruct jus-

tice, extort money from corporations and violate almost every concept of political decency?

When Mr. Nixon withholds tapes that deal with such criminal behavior, what succeeding President does he think he is protecting?

When he was not feeding us the preposterous theory that John Mitchell and Jeb Magruder and John Dean and all the others went wrong because of the bad examples set in the 1960s by Abbie Hoffman or Stokely Carmichael or Joan Baez, or somebody, Mr. Nixon was portraying himself as a naive President who just never realized all those "deplorable" things were happening in his administration until it was too late.

It is so hard for reasonable men to believe that, as Mitchell was skipping town with Watergate flames lapping around him, the President never said to his friend: "John, how involved were you?"

IF MR. NIXON would just let us hear the tapes of his conversations with Mitchell and we could see that they never talked about Watergate, we could say that the unbelievable seems to be true — and perhaps go back to worrying about the economy, or how many troops to keep in Europe.

Especially since the President has pledged us "a new level of political decency," which I take to mean that the White House is burning its enemies list, the tapes will be taken off newsmen's telephones and some of us will no longer get that annual visit by Internal Revenue Service agents.