

The Federal Diary

Agencies Abound in Tape Experts



By
Mike
Causey

If the White House is indeed having all that trouble with its tape recorders maybe the chief of personnel should consider getting outside help. Such is at hand, in the form of well-trained technicians and professionals already working in government, people who know how to make recordings that are intelligible.

White House Counsel J. Fred Buzhardt revealed this week that two controversial tapes regarding the President's role in the Watergate affair would not be made available to investigators because of a malfunction in the tape equipment. Really fellows!

The two inoperative tapes were part of a set of nine subpoenaed by the Watergate investigation unit. One would reveal, according to former White House counsel John W. Dean III, that he had a conversation with Mr. Nixon in which clemency was discussed for E. Howard Hunt. Hunt is now serving time

in federal prison for his part in the break-in at Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate apartment complex.

A second tape that the White House now says is unavailable involved a Watergate-related conversation between Mr. Nixon and John Mitchell, the then Attorney General. That one isn't available, the White House said, because the President had used an unbugged telephone, hence no tape. The Secret Service has been in charge of the tapes and operation of the equipment since they were ordered installed.

During its current technical difficulties, the White House may decide to utilize career government experts who are skilled in getting movies made and producing tape recordings without mishap. For that matter, it can in future call on a qualified cadre of 2,800 plumbers should leaks again become a problem.

Uncle Sam now has 800 specialists in the audio-visual field. They make movies of everything from presidential tours, for foreign consumption, to television messages from Smokey the Bear. Not all the 800 are tape-recorder experts, but then again, not all the tape-recorder ex-

perts in government are listed in the audio-visual civil service job category either.

The in-house specialists get from \$8,000 to \$36,000 a year. Average pay is between \$14,671 and \$26,878. At those wages, they must be good.

Secret Service agents who handled the White House tapes, on the other hand, are hired at \$8,977 and eventually reach \$17,497 after five years. Few are considered audio-visual experts.

If recruiting brochures are to be believed, however, Secret Service agents are assigned mainly to presidential security and to tracking down counterfeaters.

In their work they use tape recordings, to be sure, but an agent would not normally be expected to spend a good part of his career checking sound levels and changing tape reels or cassettes, even at the White House.

Apparently some of the agents have drawn White House tape maintenance duty and, if there is a fall guy to be had in the question of the malfunctioning or nonexistent tapes, it will probably turn out to be a Secret Service technician.

To avoid such technical difficulties in future, the White

House should consider detailing federal experts already on the payroll, who really know how to make tapes. They could pick any of the 205 employed by the Army; Navy's 142; the 147 civilians employed by the Air Force; 37 at HEW; 27 at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, or 23 who work for Agriculture.

If an expert couldn't be found in that group, the White House could go to VA, Treasury, Interior, Commerce or even the Postal Service, which has audio-visual experts. Too bad they didn't know about this before.

Suggestions: Federal workers were paid over \$4 million in fiscal 1973 for 67,845 ideas that resulted in better, or cheaper, ways to do things in government.

Air Force reckoned employee ideas resulted in savings of \$51 million and Navy civilian personnel made suggestions calculated to save the government \$39 million.

Defense Supply Agency had the highest rate of employee participation in the suggestion program, with a "receipt rate" of 21.6 suggestions for each 100 employees. Out of that total, DSA adopted nearly seven of every 100 suggestions.