

Nixon's Worst Enemy

By Tom Wicker

Richard Nixon's worst enemy is not the press and television. Richard Nixon's worst enemy is Richard Nixon. That may have been suspected when Mr. Nixon first fired Archibald Cox, setting off a national uproar, then turned around and agreed to surrender the tape recordings Mr. Cox had been seeking; but it has been made perfectly clear by the remarkable announcement in Mr. Nixon's behalf that two of those tapes never existed.

Let us pass over charitably the questions how that could be, if the Nixon taping systems were as mechanically proficient and comprehensive as heretofore described, and why the two conversations that just happened not to be taped also happened to be perhaps the two most important of the nine that had been at issue. Let us pass over charitably, if with an act of will, these reasonable questions and raise only a more immediate point. Given the months-long battle over these tapes, producing finally the Cox-Richardson-Ruckelshaus convulsion, didn't somebody think to check the nine tapes somewhere along the line?

As a matter of fact, Mr. Nixon himself ought to have known the situation. On July 24, the text of a letter from him to Senator Ervin was published, and in that letter Mr. Nixon said he had "personally listened to a number of them. The tapes are entirely consistent with what I know to be the truth and what I have stated to be the truth." Mr. Nixon could hardly have given such an assurance in good faith if he knew the tapes did not record two of the most important conversations about which there was conflicting testimony, those with John Dean on April 15, 1973, and with John Mitchell on June 20, 1972. And if he did know then that those two conversations had not been taped, his letter to Mr. Ervin should have included that information, since those talks were of primary interest to the Ervin committee.

At least one White House aide, Stephen Bull, borrowed the April 15 tape in July and kept it overnight, the official log shows. Mr. Bull told Senate investigators that he also had tried to arrange for that tape to be sent to California for Mr. Nixon's hearing on June 27, but could not arrange a courier flight. This is the tape now said to have failed to record the important Nixon-John Dean conversation of April 15, which—if it could be heard by a grand jury—might well support one of their conflicting stories about Mr. Nixon's alleged knowledge of the Watergate cover-up.

There was ample opportunity, there-

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fore, aside from the normal precautions in preparing a court case, to discover long ago that at least the Nixon-Dean tape did not exist, if it does not. By announcing that fact, if it is a fact, only at the last possible moment, when delivery to Judge Sirica was due in obedience to court orders, Mr. Nixon has done several things that do not serve Richard Nixon's interest.

He has produced another sensation, another controversy, another round of charges and doubts, which he needs about as much as he needs another big contribution from the milk producers or Howard Hughes.

This new sensation, moreover, tends to undermine the good effect that might have been derived from Mr. Nixon's announcement of a new Attorney General and a new Watergate prosecutor, to whom he said he had guaranteed the complete independence he denied Mr. Cox.

Even in making that announcement, Mr. Nixon backtracked once more. Having stoutly maintained in the Cox matter that as Chief Executive he had the right to fire anyone in the executive branch, he has now announced that he will not fire Leon Jaworski, Mr. Cox's putative successor, unless he can get the concurrence of Congressional leaders of both parties.

More important than all of this, with the smell of a cover-up so overpowering and hanging over so many matters from Watergate to Bebe Rebozo's strongbox, the missing-tapes story literally begs not to be believed. Sadly enough, it may even be true; but coming from Mr. Nixon now, it is just not likely to be believed. And that tells us much about why public opinion has turned so strongly toward impeachment.

Until recently, men and women of restraint and goodwill generally thought that holding the nation together and pursuing its business were the highest priorities; and that these could best be served if the trauma of impeachment could be avoided. But as sensation has piled upon sensation, and ordinary credulity has been stretched to the breaking point, many of the same people have come to see no way to get on with the nation's business, perhaps not even to hold it together, unless the man at the center of this endless storm is brought to judgment, and removed if necessary. The priorities have not changed, but impeachment now seems less traumatic than the storm itself.