

# The Tapes Devalued

Disclosure that another eighteen-minute segment of the subpoenaed White House tapes has belatedly been found to be inoperative raises new questions about their usefulness as testimony.

Discovery of this "phenomenon," as White House counsel J. Fred Buzhardt Jr. termed it, followed earlier revelations that the first telephone conversation between Mr. Nixon and former Attorney General John Mitchell after the Watergate break-in had not been recorded and that the tape had run out on a crucial meeting between Mr. Nixon and John Dean.

The unaccountably blank eighteen minutes eliminate the record of part of a conversation between Mr. Nixon and H. R. Haldeman on June 20th, three days after the break-in and shortly after the President's first post-Watergate meeting with John Ehrlichman, Richard G. Kleindienst and Messrs. Haldeman, Mitchell and Dean. According to Mr. Ehrlichman's testimony, Watergate and wiretaps were primary subjects of the meeting that preceded the eighteen-minute blank in the Nixon-Haldeman conversation. The unrecorded Nixon-Mitchell telephone conversation took place on the evening of the same day.

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These missing links, along with the non-existent Nixon-Dean tape of April 15, 1973, have sharply devalued the tapes as evidence of the innocence or guilt of a large number of prominent persons, including the President himself. In addition, there are the following puzzling phenomena:

Miss Rose Mary Woods, Mr. Nixon's personal secretary, has testified that a number of key tapes are rendered barely comprehensible by odd background noises, even though Mr. Haldeman had earlier considered the recordings quite adequate.

Former White House aide Alexander Butterfield has described the recordings as highly sophisticated, whereas Mr. Nixon portrayed it as an inexpensive, makeshift "little Sony" setup.

No adequate explanation has been given for the lengthy delays in turning the tapes over to the court.

Finally, and most disconcerting, there is the fact that an undisclosed number of vaguely identified tapes has been checked out for unspecified periods of time in the absence of any discernible concern for security. Mr. Haldeman's testimony, for example, shows that some of the tapes had been in his possession both before and after he left White House employ.

Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that

Chief District Court Judge John J. Sirica, in ordering the tapes to be turned over to his custody on Monday, said of the latest revelation: "This is just another instance that convinces the court that it has to take some steps, not because the court doesn't trust the White House or the President [but because] the court is interested in seeing that nothing else happens."

What has already happened cannot be divorced from Mr. Nixon's highly publicized "Operation Candor." The President's counsel has conceded that Mr. Nixon, even as he assured the Republican governors that there would be no further "bombshells," already knew about the blank tape. Nor has Mr. Nixon taken the long-promised initiative of "full disclosure," even after Judge Sirica stated that the court had no objections.

Devaluation of the tapes' integrity, along with the misrepresentations contained in the President's public relations offensive, only further erodes White House credibility.