

2 Hill Probers Listening to Nixon Tapes

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For the past three mornings, the chairman and senior Republican of the House Judiciary Committee have walked across the street from their offices to a converted hotel room, put on earphones and listened to tapes.

Each session lasted about 1½ hours. The quality of the tapes is mixed, and requires such concentration that 90 minutes is about as much as they can take at one sitting.

"It's the same problem you have whenever two persons in the same room are being recorded," said Rep. Edward Hutchinson (R-Mich.). "There's background noise and sometimes more than one person talking at once."

What Hutchinson and Judiciary Chairman Peter W. Rodino (D-N.J.) are hearing could be crucial to the question of whether President Nixon will be impeached.

The tapes are of conversations between the President and his associates on such subjects as the Watergate cover-up, the leak-plugging "plumbers," the dairy industry's campaign contribution and other matters for which Mr. Nixon's critics say he removed from office.

They include the March 21, 1973, conversation when John W. Dean III, then counsel to the President, reported on hush money being paid to Watergate break-in defendants and Mr. Nixon

did or didn't say "it would be wrong."

Hutchinson and Rodino are the only House members who have been permitted so far to read and listen to materials turned over by the White House, and other data turned over by the Watergate grand jury for their impeachment inquiry.

The two senior members are bound by their rule of confidentiality not to divulge, at this point, anything they see or hear. They can't even take notes. But transcripts of the tapes have been made, and relevant portions will be made available to all committee members when they begin hearing evidence of the President's involvement.

It is the responsibility of Rodino, Hutchinson and their senior staff to decide which parts of the materials are relevant and should be made part of the inquiry record.

The listening sessions are going on in a somewhat larger than average hotel room on the second floor of the Congressional Hotel, which the House took over several years ago as an office building annex. The impeachment staff occupies the entire floor. It is sealed off from the public.

Hutchinson said he and Rodino sit there together, sometimes listening to the same tape, following the conversations with written transcripts prepared by the White House.

Both noted that when the President was talking to someone sitting across the desk from him, the voice of the other person was considerably stronger than that of Mr. Nixon, indicating that the microphone was tilted away from the President.

Hutchinson said there was "some poor quality" to the tapes, but that with concentration and the help of transcripts it was possible to understand the conversations.

Both men refused to say whether they were listening to the tapes in chronological order. Hutchinson said he had made no specific request for tapes he wanted to hear first, but listened to those the staff put on the machine. He observed that a tape could be more helpful than a transcript because it gives the added dimension of tone and inflection to the spoken words.

The White House gave the committee 18 taped presidential conversations. The total time they consumed has not been made public, but Rodino and Hutchinson have a good deal more listening ahead.

In addition, the staff has pending a request for more White House tapes involving the Watergate cover-up, which the committee's special counsel, John Doar, estimated cover 10 to 20 hours of presidential conversations.

There is also the bulging briefcase from the Watergate grand jury containing documents and tapes, some or all of which may duplicate those already in the committee's possession. The committee staff yesterday quashed as a joke a report that the committee will have to pay Watergate Special Prosecutor Leon Jaworski's office \$37.50 for the briefcase.