Inaudibles and Unintelligibles:

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The Watergate tape transcripts released by President Nixon last week omitted approximately 1,670 portions of conversations that the White House said were "inaudible" or "unintelligible", nearly one such omission for every minute of the more than 33 hours of conversations covered.

Nearly two-thirds of the "inaudible" and "unintelligible" omissions were from the statements of President Nixon far more than such omissions for all 11 other persons quoted in the transcripts.

President Nixon's statements over the 1,254 pages of transcripts are listed as "inaudible" or "unintelligible" approximately 1,075 times, compared with about 595 such omissions for all other individuals quoted.

The transcripts of 49 conversations or statements that were turned over to the House Judiciary Committee also omitted 35 segments of conversations of unidentified length that the White House said were unrelated to the Watergate investigation.

In addition, there are 146 deletions for obscenities or personal characterizations—about 80 per cent of them in Mr. Nixon's remarks.

Many of the omissions in the President's comments occur at crucial points in discussions of the Watergate affair with his top aides.

At several points, the understanding of exactly what the President knew and did about the Watergate cover-up depends on knowing what was omitted from the transcript as being "unintelligible" or "inaudible."

For example, in the transcript of the April 15, 1973, discussion of the Watergate investigation between President Nixon and his then-top domestic adviser, John D. Ehrlichman, the President spoke 176 times and Ehrlichman 179 times.

However, the transcript of the meeting shows 98 transcripts as being "unintelligible" or "inaudible." omissions from Mr. Nixon's comments and only six from Ehrlichman's.

Again, the understanding of whether Mr. Nixon was trying to have his aides cooperate with the recently renewed Watergate probe, or whether he was trying to stifle the investigation, depends on what he actually said at the points where the White House has marked his statements as "unintelligible."

In the April 15 discussion, Mr. Nixon asks Ehrlichman whether someone had talked to Gordon Strachan, an aide to then-White House chief of staff H. R. (Bob) Haldeman.

Ehrlichman replies, "Yes sir, just about 10 minutes ago. And I've been doing all the talking so far.

Mr. Nixon: (Unintelligible) trying to talk (unintelligible).

Ehrlichman: What (Jeb Stuart) Magruder had said about him and so forth. So.

Mr. Nixon: (unintelligible) any (unintelligible) for removing him?

Erlrlichman: Not yet. Not yet.

Mr. Nixon: He's a good man—good man.

Ehrlichman: I think he, I think he'll do fine. You see. . .

Mr. Nixon: (unintelligible) you expect anyone (unintelligible) I was cogitating last night, and we've got the people that can—I mean on the obstruction of justice thing, which I think is our main problem at this time. . .

Later in the conversation this exchange occurs:

Mr. Nixon: Magruder, Magruder may be (unintelligible) a little (unintelligible) in some of that stuff.

Ehrlichman: Well, I've got to get him in, and I hope to see him today.

Mr. Nixon: He would not (unintelligible) Dean (unintelligible). According to Dean's story about those meetings which he told is about (unintelligible) Magruder's.

In a 64-minute discussion of the Watergate investigation with Assistant Attorney General Henry E. Petersen on April 17, 1973, the transcript shows that Mr. Nixon spoke 297 times and Petersen spoke 283 times. The transcript also shows 73 occasions when Mr. Nixon's comments were "inaudible"

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and 10 when Petersen's were "inaudible."

This conversation is regarded as important because Petersen then was heading the Watergate investigation and, depending on what Mr. Nixon actually said, it possibly could shed more light on whether the President was trying to hold back the investigation or was assisting it, as he has said he was.

In that conversation, the President tells Petersen:

"Now—this brings us to a basic command decision with regard—with regard to what you do about White House people. The main thing is (inaudible) and you can look at it in terms of the fact that anybody who this touches should go out—without—(inaudible). You can look at it in terms of the fact that if it touches them (inaudible) that clearly apart from whether or not anything legal stand up. Let's suppose—just take Ehrlichman as a case in point—that this thing brought in by (inaudible) that proves to be (inaudible) don't get anything else on Ehrlichman then the question is that nevertheless that in itself would raise a cloud over Ehrlichman."

There could be various legitimate explanations of the numerous inaudible or unintelligible passages. An individual could have unknowingly been speaking too softly or too far from the microphones hidden in the President's offices, or that equipment itself could be at fault.

Or, according to tape experts, an individual could have deliberately been speaking inaudibly to avoid being recorded; or, previously clear recordings could have been deliberately made unintelligible, or, the transcripts' omissions may not be inaudible at all, but may be embarrassing to Mr. Nixon.

The White House has not said how the tapes were transcribed—what quality equipment was used.

If the inaudible or unintelligible omissions are the fault of the taping system, some experts believe that the lost passages may be recoverable by using sophisticated electronic techniques to enhance the passages. Experts could also study the tapes to determine whether they had been altered.

The telephone conversations have few "inaudible" omissions, but there are some in most of the office conversations. However, a seven-minute conversation between the President and Petersen in the oval office on April 27 had no "unintelligible" omissions.

The disproportionate number of "inaudible" and "unintelligible" omissions that appear in President Nixon's conversation is shown by a 1-hour, 31-minute meeting the President had on April 14 with Haldeman and Ehrlichman—again at a key point shortly after the Watergate probe had been renewed.

President Nixon spoke 215 of the 591 times, slightly more than one-third, but the transcript lists 88 omissions in the President's comments and only 47 from the other two men together.

Another example of what "inaudible" omissions do to the transcript is provided by the following conversation in an April 16 meeting between Mr. Nixon and then-top Watergate investigator Petersen:

Petersen: "And if this information comes out I think that you should have his resignation and it should be effective. We both just (inaudible)."

President: "There's this. This is something that we're going—you know—probably great difference of opinion in the Department of Justice (inaudible). More important for the Department of Justice is (inaudible).

"Presidency have (inaudible) as a result of some diligent efforts its own (inaudible). Now with (inaudible) I don't have to announce the (inaudible). We have a situation where the U.S. Attorney, in effect, the (inaudible) thing when the President has to go in and explain (inaudible)."

Petersen: "Inaudible) for a purpose."

President: "Yeah, but — see—I don't—(inaudible) the damn sure (inaudible)."