

# Those Two-Track Tapes

The White House transcripts of Presidential conversations released last April looked bad enough for Richard Nixon. But the House Judiciary Committee's version of eight of those taped conversations turned out to look even worse when it was released last week. Along with its own full-length transcript of the eight tapes, the committee made public a line-by-line comparison of excerpts that suggested the White House version was chock-full of discrepancies, alterations and omissions—and raised the question of whether the Watergate cover-up may have extended all the way to the preparation of the White House transcripts.

To be sure, most of the thousands of discrepancies appeared to be innocent slips of the ear, the result of hasty transcriptions by the White House's harried staff of typists. And in a very few cases the committee version even seemed to favor the President. In the middle of the Sept. 15, 1972, White House transcript, for instance, Mr. Nixon said, "We are all in it together." By the committee's reckoning he said: "They're all in it together."

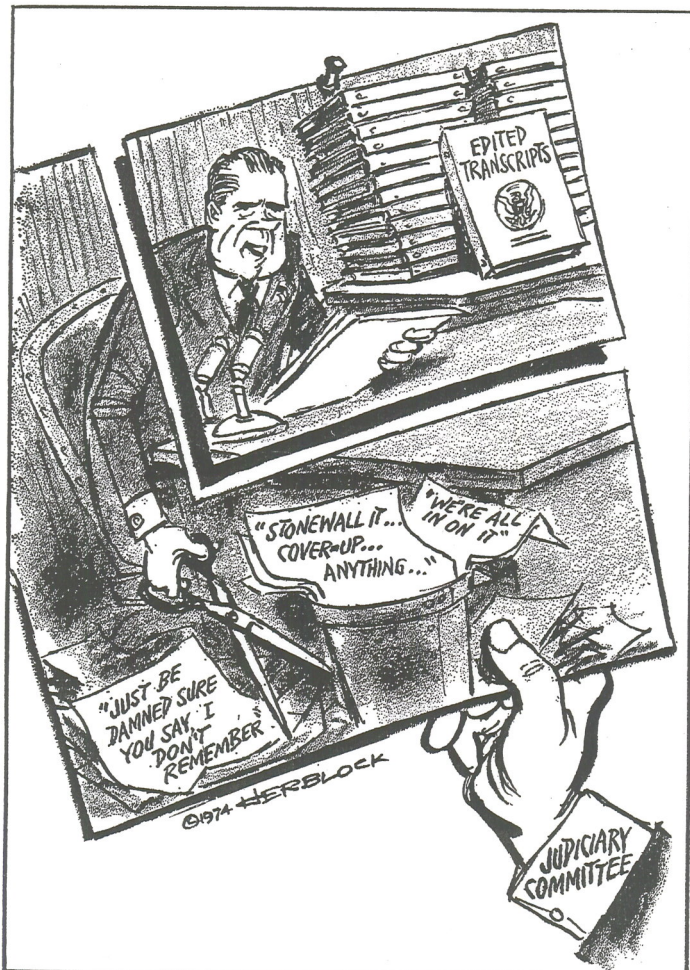
## PRESIDENTIAL PORTRAIT

But on the whole, the new transcripts cast Mr. Nixon in a far harsher light than did his own version—which he himself had given a final editing. The committee drew no conclusions. But its portrait of the President showed a far more forceful leader than the muddling and indecisive Chief Executive depicted in the White House transcripts, and suggested that he played a far more active role in the Watergate cover-up than he has ever admitted.

The most glaring discrepancy concerned a sixteen-minute conversation, largely about the cover-up, that Mr. Nixon had with John Mitchell and John Dean on March 22, 1972—a conversation that was completely dropped from the White House transcripts. Beyond that, the committee version turned what had appeared as Presidential questions into assertions, made sense out of seeming non sequiturs, and shed new light on Watergate-related matters ranging from alleged hush money for E. Howard Hunt to the wholesale erosion of trust in Mr. Nixon's beleaguered Administration.

All these discrepancies, declared Presidential counsel James D. St. Clair, were

mere "squabbling over words." And though St. Clair maintained that any three listeners to the tapes would come up with three different versions of them, the White House did not specifically challenge the accuracy of the committee's version. In preparing its transcripts, the Judiciary staff used more sophisticated equipment than the simple recorders employed by the White House. Staffers were tested for their hearing before being asked to work on



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the transcriptions, and they put in literally hundreds of hours on the job.\*

Potentially the most damaging of the discrepancies was the newfound conversation. It raised serious questions whether the President ever really did order his own investigation of the cover-up, as he insisted he had last year—and it demolished his April assertion that the White House transcripts constituted "all the additional evidence needed to get Watergate behind us." The White House belatedly explained that the

\*The committee was not infallible, however. In its March 22 transcript, President Nixon was quoted as saying that someone named Earl Nash "worries the s--- out of us." The remark sent reporters searching for Nash—and the committee experts back to listen again. They decided that the name was probably a truncated reference to national security, as in, "Er, Nat—."

President himself had deleted the conversation from the public record as being of "dubious relevancy." But in the end the Administration's response only fueled suspicions that the White House transcripts might have been penciled to protect the President. Said Democratic Rep. George E. Danielson of California: "I can only draw one inference—that it was done intentionally, that it was not done accidentally."

The deleted conversation in the President's Executive Office Building hideaway took place the day after the President claims he launched his own "personal" investigation to "get all the facts." But the thrust of the conversation was how best to minimize the damage. "Up to this point, the whole theory has been containment, as you know, John," Mr. Nixon told Mitchell at one point. "The point is, get the goddam thing over with." To do that, the President and his aides decided to change their strategy to what was described as a "modified limited hang-out"—meaning a response that would satisfy Watergate investigators while disclosing as little as possible.

## 'I KNOW NOTHING MORE'

The plan called for Dean to craft a "general" report to the Watergate committee, acknowledging only the most inescapable facts ("I don't want to get all that goddam specific," Mr. Nixon had told Dean the day before). A carefully selected list of witnesses would be made available to testify before the committee in closed session. And the President was to send along his personal assurances that, as he put it, "this is everything we know; I know nothing more."

"The purpose of this scenario is to clean the Presidency," Mr. Nixon explained. But he made clear that he did not want to lose any of his aides in the process—and offered a rare glimpse of himself in telling why. "That's what Eisenhower—that's all he cared about," Mr. Nixon said. "He only cared about—Christ, 'Be sure he was clean.' Both in the fund thing and the (Sherman) Adams thing. But I don't look at it that way... We're going to protect our people, if we can." And he seemed willing to go to almost any length to do so. "For that reason, I am perfectly willing to—I don't give a s--- what happens," the President declared. "I want you all to stonewall it, let them plead the Fifth Amendment, cover-up or anything else, if it'll save it—save the plan. That's the whole point." Then he added, almost as

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White House Transcript

P. To think of Mitchell and Bob would have allowed-- would have allowed -- this kind of operation to be in the campaign committee.

D. I don't think he knew it was there.

P. I don't think that Mitchell knew about this sort of thing.

House Judiciary Committee Transcript

PRESIDENT... (Unintelligible) to think that Mitchell and Bob would allow, would have allowed this kind of operation to be in the Committee.

DEAN. I don't think he knew it was there.

PRESIDENT. You kidding?

DEAN. I don't --

PRESIDENT. You don't think Mitchell knew about this thing?

Gordon Strachan knew about the Water-gate break-in beforehand, Mr. Nixon replied in the committee's transcript, "Well then, Bob knew." A few moments later, when Dean told him that he did not think that Mitchell knew the Water-gate burglary was planned in his re-election committee, Mr. Nixon remarked in disbelief, "You kidding?" Both comments were deleted from the White House version. And a suggestive remark by Ehrlichman in the March 22 cover-up discussion became complete gibberish. "The issue of whether or not I had a phone call reporting the burglary--" Ehrlichman said in the committee version. In the White House transcripts it was attributed to Haldeman, and came out, "The committee would issue a warrant on our phone calls. Bully!"

**SECOND ECHELON**

By late March, however, the President's second echelon was already beginning to crack--though only the vaguest hints appeared in the White House transcripts. "Dwight (Chapin) ... now wants a lawyer," Dean told Mr. Nixon in the committee's March 21 transcript. "Uh, uh, Kalmbach has hired himself a lawyer; Colson has retained a lawyer; and now ... self-protection is setting in." "Well," replied the President, "Let's not trust them"--a remark dropped from the White House account.

White House press secretary Ronald Ziegler scoffed at the significance of the committee transcripts and denounced their release as a "hyped public relations campaign" against the President. Mr. Nixon's counsel, James St. Clair, urged that the new transcripts be read as a whole. "It is the over-all 'gist that counts,'" he said. But even taken as a whole, the committee transcripts raise legitimate doubts whether Mr. Nixon fought so long to hold on to the tapes in order to protect the confidentiality of the Presidency, as he said--or whether he was using the privileges of the Presidency to protect himself.

an afterthought: "On the other hand, uh, uh, I would prefer ... that you do it the other way"--presumably referring to a "modified limited hangout" that avoided bloody confrontation.

The Judiciary Committee transcripts indicate that other Presidential statements about containing the cover-up were changed or omitted in the White House version, too. According to the White House transcripts, in a March 22 talk in the EOB with Dean that preceded the deleted conversation, Mr. Nixon declared: "Well, all John Mitchell is arguing then is that now we use flexibility in order to get off the cover-up line." But in the committee version, Mr. Nixon's words were, "... in order to get on with the cover-up plan." And at least one such discrepancy cast fresh doubt on the President's assertion that he had not learned about the cover-up until March 21. On March 13--eight days before--Mr. Nixon considered and apparently ruled out a full disclosure of the facts. "Is it too late to go the hang-out road?" he asked Dean. In the White House transcripts Mr. Nixon left the question there. In the committee version he answered it himself: "Yes, it is."

**'MAJOR GUY'**

In both sets of transcripts Mr. Nixon indicated concern about E. Howard Hunt, but he saw him as a far greater threat in the committee's version than he did in his own--and seemed far more willing to pay for Hunt's silence. "Your major guy to keep under control is Hunt?" Mr. Nixon asked Dean in the White House transcript. "Does he know a lot?" He went on, "His price is pretty high but at least we can buy the time." In the committee text, Mr. Nixon flatly asserted Hunt was "your major guy to keep under control ... because he knows

about a lot of other things." And he added, "His price is pretty high but ... we should, we should buy the time."

The White House transcripts had diluted words of praise for the man who became the President's accuser, John Dean. But in the committee version, Mr. Nixon told Mitchell warmly that "John Dean ... put the fires out ... almost got the damn thing nailed down til past the election, and so forth." Later on, Mr. Nixon enthused, "Dean has really been, uh, something on this." "That he has, Mr. President," replied Mitchell, "no question about it ... You've got a very solid guy ..." All these remarks were dropped from the White House version.

By contrast, the White House transcripts tended to shield aides who remained loyal. When Dean told the President in their March 13 discussion that

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White House Transcript

P. Is it too late to go the hang-out road?

D. Yes, I think it is.

The hang-out road --

P. The hang-out road (inaudible).

House Judiciary Committee Transcript

PRESIDENT. Uh, is it too late to, to, frankly, go the hang-out road? Yes, it is.

DEAN. I think it is. I think -- Here's the -- The hang-out road --

PRESIDENT. The hang-out road's going to have to be rejected. I, some, I understand it was rejected.