

The Loneliness of Richard Nixon

They check the tapes out of the locked and guarded room of the Executive Office Building next door to the White House. Then Stephen Bull, special assistant to the President, sorts them out by number and date, as designated in the subpoenas.

It is not all that easy to find the exact conversations that the prosecutors want. While the tape reels from the Oval Office have only one day's conversation or less on them, the reels from the President's hideaway in the E.O.B. may have as much as a week's conversation, depending on how frequently he secluded himself in that office. The recordings from the bugged phones in the Oval Office, the Lincoln Sitting Room and the E.O.B. may have as much as two or three weeks of conversation on them.

Tension and concern now run so high in the White House over the tapes and the future of Richard Nixon that Bull and others have instituted a kind of Fail-Safe system to help guard the integrity of the tapes, or whatever of it remains. Bull will not handle the original reels. He gets only duplicates. He carefully takes each 5-in. reel and puts it on a small Sony tape recorder whose erase mechanism has been immobilized by White House technicians. Then he clamps earphones on his head and begins to track down the specified conversations that the court has ordered to be turned over.

When Bull finds the right conversation he stops the machine. Then everything is taken into the President—the Sony with its defunct erasure button, the reels in place ready to go. The President does his listening either in the Lincoln Sitting Room, which is on the second floor of the mansion in the southeast corner, or in his E.O.B. office. Both places are secluded and relatively quiet. Yet the sounds of Washington still intrude, and earphones are provided to assure the highest quality listening. When Nixon is in the Lincoln Sitting Room, the Sony is placed on the small desk that is in front of the south window. Nixon puts the earphones on, settles himself into the armchair covered in brown velvet, a favorite brought from the New York apartment. The President puts his feet up on the ottoman and uses one of his yellow legal pads to make notes as the tape unwinds. The hours slip by as he relives history in this melancholy loneliness.

No President has ever been in a similar position. The impeachment of Andrew Johnson was political, a controversy about public acts of Johnson. Secrecy and instructions to subordinates in the shadowy recesses of the White House were not an issue.

Nixon's world has shrunk almost to himself, his family and a handful of aides. Cabinet officers and agency heads are allowed in when business demands entry. But there is no camaraderie. In the old days somebody like John Connally could roar and swear at the enemies and tell a few stories to perk up the President. Connally has his own problems now. There was no meeting with the congressional leadership last week. A session with the economic advisers was postponed, then canceled. The bulletin board on which the President's and Mrs. Nixon's schedules are posted each day was empty most of the week. Those brief encounters with the public that were allowed, such as being photographed with Treasury Secretary William Simon, were brittle, posed affairs. The President smiled too much for comfort.

Cabinet members came around Wednesday morning for a 15-minute slide show on the achievements of the Administration in improving the design of federal buildings. Alexander Haig, the White House staff chief, went to the meeting to give a pep talk. The President did not attend.

Many Presidents have lamented the loneliness of their position. That description was never quite accurate. They alone had to make decisions, but those decisions were on policy issues on which they had counsel and support before and after. Even when Harry Truman fired General Douglas MacArthur, a move that outraged millions of Americans, Truman had the solid backing of men like George Marshall. Nixon has few such believing men.

He moves now from cubicle to cubicle, more protected than ever by the Secret Service and the few aides allowed in contact with him. His few public encounters are with "sanitized" audiences, as they are now called, those like the Southern California business friends Roy Ash assembled for dinner in Los Angeles. Even those audiences, while still sympathetic to a friend, are riddled with people who see the reasons for impeachment. Nixon keeps these people, too, far from true intimacy.

The official White House photographers have been ordered not to take pictures of Nixon unless he is in his office and only with his express permission. Even his cruises down the Potomac on the *Sequoia* are more secluded than ever. The Navy cannot seal off the entire river, but it has constructed an 8-ft. fence across the entrance to the dock and down an adjoining pier; now no one can see the President get on or off his boat.