

Why Nixon Didn't

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Former President Nixon says in his memoirs that he did not destroy the tape-recorded conversations that led to his resignation from office because he suspected that some of his aides might turn against him and "the tapes would give me at least some protection."

Why Nixon did not destroy the tapes that were so damaging to his cause has been one of the continuing mysteries of the Watergate scandal. He was under no obligation to make the recordings, and he was free to do with them as he

wished until they were subpoenaed by the courts and prosecutors.

Last September 3, in a televised interview with British television personality David Frost, Nixon spoke at length about why he kept evidence that caused most members of Congress to turn against him and sent several of his top assistants to prison.

He said he did not believe the tapes would ever become public and, if he had destroyed them, it would have appeared that he was trying to hide something.

But in his 400,000-work book,

"RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon," to be published May 15 by Grosset & Dunlap, the former President gives a different reason, one that is more in keeping with the dark suspicions he held toward many people in power in those days.

Additional excerpts from the memoir are appearing today in a second installment in some newspapers.

The existence of the tapes was disclosed on July 16, 1973, before the Senate Watergate committee by Alexander P. Butterfield, Nixon's

Burn the Tapes

appointments secretary, while Nixon was in Bethesda Naval Hospital recovering from viral pneumonia.

Nixon wrote that he was shocked by the news that the committee had learned about the tapes.

According to H.R. Haldeman, the White House chief of staff, the tapes were secretly installed for the President's use "for references when visitors ranging from foreign statesmen to his own Cabinet officers and advisers made statements that conflicted with their private talks with the President."

In April, 1973, when the Watergate scandal began to build, Nixon had suggested to Haldeman that the tapes be destroyed, according to both their accounts, but Haldeman did not consider it an order and the tapes remained.

"In the hospital," Nixon wrote, "I raised the idea of whether we should not destroy the tapes now."

"Finally, I decided that the tapes were my best insurance against the unforeseeable future," he continued. "I was prepared to believe that others would turn

against me just as John Dean had done, and in that case the tapes would give me at least some protection."

One-time White House counsel John Dean had told the Senate Watergate committee of Nixon's involvement in the coverup.

Dean's charges, however, were denied by other White House aides, and the Watergate committee and the special prosecutor's office went after the tapes through the courts.

"I now believe," Nixon concluded in his memoirs, "that from the time of the disclosure of the

existence of the tapes and my decision not to destroy them, my presidency had little chance of surviving to the end of its term."

That Nixon's deep suspicions of friend and foe caused him to misjudge the severity of the Watergate scandal is shown in his account of his dismissal of the special Watergate prosecutor, Archibald Cox, on Oct. 20, 1973.

Attorney General Elliot L. Richardson resigned rather than carry out the Nixon order, and his deputy, William D. Ruckelshaus, said he quit before he could be dismissed, although the White House announced he had been discharged.

Almost immediately, Nixon's action became known as "the Saturday night massacre."

Nixon was suspicious of Cox from the time he was appointed on May 18, 1973, partly because he was a Democrat who was a friend of the Kennedys. Immediately after his appointment, Nixon noted, Cox began inquiring about White House tapes and files.

"No White House in history could have survived the kind of operation Cox was planning," Nixon wrote.

Finally, when Cox rejected a Nixon compromise offer on the tapes, Nixon ordered him dismissed.

"I strongly felt that I could not allow Cox to defy openly a presidential directive," he wrote. "I thought that Cox had deliberately exceeded his authority; I felt that he was trying to get me personally, and I wanted him out."

After having dismissed him, however, Nixon wrote, "I was taken by surprise by the ferocious intensity of the reaction."

Nixon attributes the adverse reaction to the "Blue Book," 1300 pages of transcripts that he released to the public and the House Judiciary Committee on April 30, 1974, to a belief that people did not want to be told that conversations in the White House are not always high-minded.

"There is noble talk in the Oval Office to be sure, high-minded and disinterested. But there are also frustration, worry, anxiety, profanity and, above all, raw pragmatism when it comes to politics and political survival," he wrote.

"With the Blue Book transcripts, I was in the position of telling the American people things that they did not want to know."

Nixon says that on May 7, 1974, he listened to tape-recorded conversations of June 23, 1972, in which he agreed to order the Central Intelligence Agency to interfere with the Watergate investigation, and decided then that "we should draw the line on producing any further tapes."

By a unanimous decision of the Supreme Court, he lost his appeal of a federal court ruling that he turn over 64 new tapes of Watergate-related conversations. His closest aides, including Alexander M. Haig Jr., his chief of staff, advised resignation.

"On Thursday, August 1, I told Haig that I had decided to resign," Nixon wrote.

This was the first indication from Nixon that he had made his decision that early. According to several published accounts, he did talk of resigning then, but members of his family talked him out of it.

In any event, there was another public relations effort to continue in office that Nixon does not mention in his memoirs. After an agonizing week with his staff at Camp David, Nixon returned to Washington on Monday, released the tapes, insisted they were no cause to resign and told his Cabinet he would refuse to do so.

His account skips this and goes to Wednesday, August 7, when Republican leaders in Congress told him he had no chance of avoiding impeachment.

His account of announcing on television Thursday night that he would resign at noon the next day, his emotional farewell speech in the East Room and his boarding a helicopter for the first leg of his flight home to California are in keeping with published accounts.