

WHITE HOUSE TAPES
1ST CHRONOLOGICAL RELEASE
FEBRUARY 1971 - JULY 1971



Nixon Presidential Materials Staff

National Archives and Records Administration

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NIXON WHITE HOUSE TAPES

FIRST INSTALLMENT FEBRUARY 1971 - JULY 1971

This group of 134 Nixon White House tapes, released on October 5, 1999, consists of the conversations which took place in the Oval Office, in the President's Old Executive Office Building (EOB) office, and on certain telephones in the Oval Office, the President's EOB office, and in the Lincoln Sitting Room in the Residence of the White House. These recordings were recorded from February 16, 1971 to July 30, 1971. Additionally, one telephone tape was recorded between July 26 and August 16, 1971. For archival purposes, it is included in this installment.

These recorded White House tapes are part of the Presidential historical materials of the Nixon Administration. These materials are in the custody of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) under the provisions of the Presidential Recordings and Materials Preservation Act of 1974 (PRMPA) (44 USC 2111 note). Access to the Nixon Presidential materials is governed by the PRMPA and its implementing public access regulations.

A Brief History of the White House Taping System

In February 1971, the United States Secret Service (USSS), at the request of the President, installed listening devices in the White House. They placed seven microphones in the Oval Office: five in the President's desk, and one on each side of the fireplace. They placed two microphones in the Cabinet Room under the table near the President's chair. The Secret Service technicians wired all devices to central mixers which were then connected to recorders in an old locker room in the White House basement.

In April 1971, The Secret Service technicians installed four microphones in the President's office in the EOB. These microphones were located in the President's desk and wires led to a mixer and recorders in an adjoining room. The Secret Service also tapped the telephones in the Oval Office, in the President's EOB office and in the Lincoln Sitting Room. These telephone conversations were recorded by tapping the telephone lines from the White House switchboard and relaying the conversations to recorders in a closet in the basement of the Residence.

Finally, in May 1972, the Secret Service set up a taping system in the President's study in Aspen Lodge at Camp David. There were three separate recording systems put in place. A single microphone recorded conversations taking place in the study. The telephone on the President's desk was tapped as was the telephone on the study table.

This was a secret taping system maintained by the Secret Service. Only President Nixon, H.R. Haldeman, and a few of the President's personal assistants knew the system existed. One of its key features was that the recording equipment in the Oval Office, the EOB office, at Camp David, and on the telephones was sound activated, operating without a conscious decision by the President to record a specific conversation. Most participants were unaware that their

conversations were being recorded. The system was tied to the Presidential Locator System and would only activate if the President was present in the room. It was designed to continue recording for fifteen to thirty seconds after the President left the room.

The Cabinet Room recording system operated somewhat differently. It was a manual rather than a sound activated system. It was activated by Alexander Butterfield, a Special Assistant to the President who managed the President's activities in the West Wing of the White House. Butterfield activated the system from a switch on his desk (although the Secret Service also placed on/off switches on either side of the President's chair at the Cabinet Room table). When Butterfield inadvertently left the system "on," the tape recorders captured non-presidential conversations as well as hours of room noise.

Tapes Processing

The Nixon Presidential Materials Staff (NLNS) has achivally processed the sound recordings for public access under the PRMPA, its implementing regulations, and the 1996 Tapes Settlement Agreement. Archival processing includes duplicating the recordings to preserve the original tapes, describing the contents of the tapes by creating tape subject logs and other finding aids, and reviewing the tapes for restrictions. The PRMPA regulations define eight restriction categories: Release of the information would:

- A) violate a Federal statute or agency policy;
- B) reveal national security information;
- C) pending or approved claim, would violate an individual's rights;
- D) constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy;
- E) disclose trade secrets or confidential commercial or financial information;
- F) disclose investigatory information compiled for law enforcement purposes;
- G) disclose private and personal material;
- H) disclose non-historical material.

In some cases, NLNS withheld certain portions which were so unintelligible that the staff could not adequately review them for release at this time. These portions are noted on the log as "[Unintelligible]." For all of the withdrawals (except those removed because they were unintelligible), the log will note what the restriction category is and the duration of the withdrawal. For national security withdrawals, the log will also indicate the main topic or topics of the withdrawal to facilitate the mandatory review process. All withdrawals, including unintelligible withdrawals, are identified on the tapes by a ten second tone.

Description of the February 1971 - July 1971 Conversations

There are 3646 conversations totaling approximately 443 hours of recordings which are being released at this time. The conversations involve a wide variety of participants including White House staff members H.R. Haldeman, Henry Kissinger, John Ehrlichman, Charles Colson, Ronald Ziegler, and Rose Mary Woods. They also include members of the Cabinet, other department and agency personnel, Members of Congress, foreign leaders, members of the press, and the general public. Conversations include a wide variety of issues and document the daily

routine of the President and his staff, and include discussions on public relations, appointments, ceremonial events, polling information, speeches, and the President's schedule. Topics also include domestic initiatives and issues, such as the environment, Supersonic Transport funding, the Alaska Pipeline, Wage and Price controls, Revenue Sharing, the Supreme Court's busing decision, drug and crime policies, the development of a national cancer policy, the ratification of the 26th Amendment to the Constitution, the anti war movement and the May Day demonstrations, the Pentagon Papers, government reorganization, and welfare reform.

The conversations also document foreign policies and world events, including the Vietnam War, the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in Operation Lam Son, the Paris Peace Talks, the initiatives with the People's Republic of China on establishing diplomatic relations, the Strategic Arms and Limitations Talks (SALT), foreign economic and trade policies, US-Japan relations, foreign aid, and Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions (MBFR) in Europe.

Tape Logs and Transcripts

In the course of processing the tapes, NLNS staff prepared tape subject logs as researcher aids to follow the conversations. Each log contains the tape number, the conversation, the location, date and time of the conversation, and the names of the participants involved. The logs include activity statements which document when someone entered or left the room. In instances when there is a telephone conversation in one of the offices, the logs also contain cross references to the corresponding telephone recording, noting the tape and conversation number. Some of the conversations also contain partial transcripts which were prepared by the Watergate Special Prosecution Force for use during the various "Watergate" trials. In addition, there are some conversations with other partial transcripts. These were created by the NLNS staff in response to court orders for special access to information contained on the tapes. In cases where partial transcripts exist, the tape subject log will contain a notation where a transcript has been created for that particular portion of conversation.

Variations in sound quality can produce wide variations in what is heard. Even though transcripts may be prepared with great care and substantial effort, many points of ambiguity are inevitable, and erroneous or different interpretations from transcripts are always possible. As a general policy, the National Archives does not create transcripts of conversations, and considers these transcripts to be an interpretation of the record rather than the record itself. NARA considers the actual tapes to be the record, and strongly urges users to listen to the tapes in forming their own interpretation.

Conversation Numbers

During the processing of the White House tapes, NLNS identified and assigned a unique number to each recorded conversation. The conversation number consists of an initial number which identifies the reel of original White House tape. Each conversation on each reel is further identified by a unique number, with the first conversation on a particular reel labeled "1," the second conversation labeled "2," the third conversation labeled "3," and so on, until the tape goes blank.

When listening to an Oval Office or an EOB office tape recording, there may be instances where the President or someone else in the room places or receives a telephone call while a meeting is in progress. The tape subject log identifies each instance by an activity statement, alerting the listener as to what is occurring, and lists a cross reference, if there is one, indicating the tape and conversation number for that telephone conversation on the White house telephone tapes. Likewise, the tape subject logs for the White House telephone tapes indicate the cross reference, if there is one, with the corresponding conversation on an Oval Office or EOB office recording.

Audio Quality

The audio quality of the recordings varies greatly. In general, conversations recorded in the Oval Office are of good audio quality; those recorded in the President's EOB office are of poorer sound quality. Conversations recorded on telephones are generally very audible; however, in some instances, the recording equipment malfunctioned, and those conversations are barely audible. In some instances, background noises, such as footsteps or the clinking of coffee cups and glasses, make parts of tape segments more difficult to understand.

The National Archives duplicated the original tapes using both analog and digital technology for preservation purposes and to produce copies with improved sound quality and audibility for the review of the conversations. Digital Audio Cassettes (DATs) were used for review purposes. Analog cassette copies were then produced from DATs for researcher use.

Executive Order 12958 and Declassification

In processing these recordings for public access, the National Archives implemented Executive Order 12958, which mandates declassification of materials more than twenty-five years old. Using agency guidelines, on-site visits from agency declassification specialists, detailed reference information, and textual records from the Nixon Presidential materials, the NLNS staff was able to review substantial amounts of material. The National Archives determined that only fourteen hours and thirty minutes required restriction out of the 553 hours in this segment. These 483 withdrawals are indicated on the various tape subject logs. In addition, for national security withdrawals, the tape subject log indicates the main subject or subjects that have been withdrawn. As a result, researchers may easily identify portions that they are interested in, and request a mandatory review of that particular segment.

Other Finding Aids

In addition to the tapes subject logs, NLNS has created the following lists to assist researchers in their work:

Conversation list--provides a complete list of each conversation found on these tapes, including: the date and time of the meeting, the participants (by individual, or described by group), the length of the released portion of the conversation, and the cassette where it can be found.

Name list--a list of names found on the tape subject logs and the conversation number(s) where the person is mentioned or is a participant.

Geographic Names list--a list of place names found on the tapes subject logs and the conversation number(s) where the place is mentioned.

Acronyms list--a list of acronyms found on the tape subject logs and the conversation number(s) where the acronym is mentioned.