

WHITE HOUSE TAPES  
CABINET ROOM CONVERSATIONS



Nixon Presidential Materials Staff

National Archives and Records Administration

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## **NIXON WHITE HOUSE TAPES**

### **CABINET ROOM TAPES**

On October 16, 1997, the Nixon Presidential Materials staff opened eighty-three Nixon White House tapes containing conversations which took place within the Cabinet Room from February 16, 1971 through July 18, 1973. This release consisted of approximately 436 conversations and totaled approximately 154 hours. The Cabinet Room was one of seven locations in which conversations were surreptitiously taped. The complete Cabinet Room conversations are available to the public on reference cassettes C1 – C251

During review of the Cabinet Room tapes, approximately 78 hours of conversations were withdrawn under the provisions of the Presidential Recordings and Materials Preservation Act of 1974 (PRMPA) (44 USC 2111 note) and Executive Order (EO) 12356. These segments were re-reviewed under EO 12958 (April 17, 1995). As a result, the Nixon Presidential Materials Staff was able to open approximately 69 hours of previously restricted audio segments. The declassified segments were released on February 28, 2002, and are available as excerpted conversation segments on reference cassettes E504 – E633.

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 PRMPA. 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 State 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 President's 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 close 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 conversations. 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 were 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-historical conversations as well as hours of room noise.

### **Tapes Processing**

The Nixon Presidential Materials Staff (NLNS) has archivally processed the sound recordings for public access under the PRMPA, its implementing regulations, and the 1996 Tapes Settlement Agreement. Archival processing included duplicating the recordings to preserve the original tapes, enhancing the sound quality of the tape copies, 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. In accordance with PRMPA and the 1996 Tapes Settlement Agreement, NARA restricts the content if release of the information would:

- Violate a Federal statute or agency policy (restriction category "A");
- Reveal national security information (restriction category "B");
- Violate an individual's rights (pending) (restriction category "C");
- Constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy (restriction category "D");
- Disclose trade secrets or confidential commercial or financial information (category "E");
- Disclose investigatory/law enforcement information (restriction category "F");
- Disclose purely private and personal information, as defined by the PRMPA (restriction category "G");
- Disclose non-historical material (restriction category "H").

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 tape subject log as "[Unintelligible]." For all of the withdrawals (except those removed because they were unintelligible), the tape subject log will note the relevant restriction category and the duration of the withdrawal. For national security withdrawals, the tape subject log will also indicate the main topic or topics of the withdrawal to facilitate the mandatory review process. Portions of conversations determined to fall within the "G" restriction category were deleted from the tapes and returned to the Nixon Estate, in accordance with the PRMPA. All withdrawals, including unintelligible withdrawals, are identified on the tapes by a ten second tone.

### **A Brief Description of the Cabinet Room Conversations**

There are 436 Cabinet Room conversations totaling approximately 223 hours. The conversations include a wide variety of participants including Cabinet members, White House staff members (including the Domestic Council), the National Security Council, Republican and Bipartisan Congressional leaders, Presidential Committees and Commissions (including the Cost of Living Council, the Pay Board and the Price Commission), those attending Presidential bill signings, Governors and Mayors, special interest and constituent groups and those on White House tours. Topics include a wide range of domestic and foreign policy issues, planning for Presidential trips and head of state visits; U.S. and World economics, and military operations.

Discussions of domestic policy include the economy, drugs, travel and the budget. Topics related to the economy include the Economic Stabilization Act, Wage and Price controls, revenue sharing, inflation, the Pay Board and the Federal and Defense budgets. Additional policy and planning discussions involve enforcement of illegal drug policy, busing, railroads, and the energy crisis.

There are a wide variety of foreign policy conversations which take place in the Cabinet Room. These include in depth discussions relating to Vietnam, including troop deployments, planning, and peace negotiations. Foreign relations topics include planning for the President's trips to China and the Soviet Union, United Nations votes, the International Monetary fund, free trade, the Trade Bill, Import/Export Controls, the World Economy. Negotiations with foreign countries include the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT), Foreign Aid, and peace treaties. Countries regions of interest include, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, the Peoples Republic of China, Taiwan, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, Canada, Turkey, Japan, Korea, Spain, France, New Zealand, the Middle East, South America and Africa.

### **Tape Logs and Transcripts**

In the course of processing the tapes, NLNS staff prepared tape subject logs as researcher aids to follow conversations. Each log contains the tape number, the conversation, the tape location, the 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 a 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 contain partial transcripts which were prepared by the Watergate Special Prosecution Force for use during their investigation and various Watergate trials. In addition, there are a few conversations with other partial transcripts. These were created by 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 existing 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 sequentially until the tape goes blank.

When listening to an Oval Office, an EOB office, or a Camp David Hard Wire 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 tapes indicate the cross reference, if there is one, with the corresponding conversation from an Oval Office, an EOB office, or Camp David Hard Wire conversation.

### **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 the telephone 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 the 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 EO 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 approximately ten hours required restriction out of the 78 hours previously withheld in this segment. The 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:

Acronym List: This is a listing of acronyms which appear in the tape subject logs and the conversation numbers in which they occur.

Name List: This is an alphabetical list of names which appear in the tapes subject logs and the numbers of the conversation in which they appear.

Geographical List: This is an alphabetical compilation of cities, countries, etc. which appear on the tapes subject logs.

Abbreviations List: This is a list of abbreviations used in the tapes subject logs.

Conversation List: Due to the length of the Nixon White House Tapes, it was necessary to create several reference cassettes for each Nixon White House Tape. The conversation list is a database (in *Access 97*) which allows the researcher to match a White House tape conversation to the appropriate reference cassette(s). The following information is also included in the database: 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 any special remarks.

**NOTE:** When using the Complete Cabinet Room conversations, researchers should be aware that withdrawn portions may have been reviewed and released as part of the declassified Cabinet Room release. The tape subject logs for Cabinet Room conversations will refer researchers to the reference cassette which contains any declassified segments.