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Do the New Nixon Tapes Tell Us Anything New?

Historians/History

by Richard A. Moss and Luke Nichter

Mr. Moss is a Ph.D candidate in History from George Washington University. Mr. Nichter is a Ph.D candidate from Bowling Green State University. They are currently working on a book about the Nixon tapes, and post the transcripts of Nixon tape conversations, included this newest release, at nixontapes.org.

The Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library—now officially integrated into the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)—and its director, Dr. Timothy Naftali, should be commended for the release of Nixon tapes that occurred on July 11, 2007. The release, totaling 165 conversations recorded between November 3 and November 19, 1972, was both symbolic and substantive.

The release was symbolic, coming as it did on the first day of the Library's new federal status, and it was substantive, as these tapes shed light on issues such as the Vietnam negotiations breakthrough, the Nixon administration's second term staff reorganization plans, and as the only presidential recordings to preserve the president's and his closest adviser's thoughts during a presidential election. Although the release comprises only 11 1/2 hours out of a total of 3,700 hours of Nixon tapes recorded between 1971 and 1973, there are numerous gems for scholars and curious listeners alike.

The release represents the first—and perhaps only—time tapes comprehensively document a presidential election. The election coverage on the new tapes can be split into three parts: Nixon's phone calls from the White House Lincoln Sitting Room as the early November 7, 1972 election night returns came in; then, late night phone calls and meetings in his Executive Office Building (EOB) hideaway office as the West coast returns were announced; and finally, meetings and phone calls in the Oval Office the next morning on final vote tallies from around the country.

The man President Nixon turned to for the latest election results was Counsel to the President, Chuck Colson. Colson was the first adviser to speak of a "landslide" Nixon victory, even before polls were closed on the West coast. After Nixon gave his thank you speech at the Shoreham Hotel, he returned to his EOB office with only Colson and Chief of Staff Bob Haldeman to monitor the late returns. That was when victory set in for the president, who at one point whooped "we're in!" That, of course, called for a celebration, so Nixon ordered up a celebratory meal of fried eggs, bacon, and toast for three, shortly after 2:00 am from a surprised White House Mess. However, victory did not mean the end of all hard feelings. After Nixon's opponent, Senator George McGovern, conceded, Nixon remarked, "you know, this fella' to the last was a prick." In another election night conversation, Nixon commented that McGovern "doesn't know his ass from first base."

The new tapes provide a unique window on the eve of the election into the major snag in peace negotiations aimed at ending America's involvement in the Vietnam conflict by removing the last remaining troops and bringing home the POWs. The negotiations were stalled not by the intransigence of America's enemy, North Vietnam, but rather by the intractability of America's ally, South Vietnam. The tapes also confirm long-held suspicions about a "decent interval" theory first argued by ex-CIA agent Frank Snepp and subsequently reaffirmed by historians such as Jeffrey Kimball, that Nixon hoped to keep South Vietnam afloat only so long as it did not affect his chances for reelection. Privately, Nixon instructed Colson on the proper line to take with the McGovern camp: "The election is not going to hurry us into making a bad agreement and it isn't going to delay us from making a good agreement." Despite the statement, the newly released tapes show how Nixon's approach to handling South Vietnamese president Nguyen Van Thieu changed with his own landslide reelection. Nixon stated to Haldeman: "we're just going to have to, in my opinion, then say to Thieu, 'This is it. If you don't want to go, fine. Then we, we'll make our own deal and you'll have to paddle your own canoe.' "

Finally, the tapes reveal a great deal about the post-election plans for an executive branch reshuffle. In his memoirs Haldeman recalled: "the senior White House staff was assembled basking in the glory of Nixon's landslide reelection the night before... eyelids drooping, they looked on sleepily as Nixon entered to make his ritual speech of thanks for their efforts. Instead, they were shocked awake as Nixon, instead of lauding them, stated quietly that they were all required to resign." On the newly released tapes, we hear Nixon comment that the "only fair thing [to do] is to have them all submit their letters [of resignation.]"

Other related tidbits on the new tapes include that Nixon assumed that national security adviser Henry Kissinger would be "not as influential" in a Nixon second term, now that historic agreements with the Soviet Union and China were in the past. Other top officials, such as Secretary of State Williams Rogers and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, Nixon and Haldeman agreed, were "special problems," and it was hoped they could be compelled to leave the administration within six months.

Also, Nixon, distraught by the poor performance of his party's Congressional candidates, stated that the "Republican Party can't be rebuilt." Most dramatically, while giving serious consideration to the Party's potential future leadership—perhaps Michigan Governor George Romney or California Governor Ronald Reagan—Nixon pointedly commented, "I don't know how it would work out, but don't rule out [former Texas Democratic Governor] John Connally." Nixon seemed to suggest that now that his mandate was clear, that he desired to start a new political party with John Connally as its leader, who would become, by default, Nixon's chosen successor in 1976. Nixon summed up that the "only ones opposed to that [idea] are the poor bastards in line to get the [president's] job."

We have learned a remarkable amount from such a relatively small release of tapes, and with over 1,000 hours yet to be released, we are bound to learn much more from the Nixon tapes. The symbolic decision of the Nixon Presidential Library to release these additional hours marked a commitment to transparency and a reinvigorated effort to process and make public backlogged materials, a vigor matched only by that of so many researchers still interested—after more than three decades—in eavesdropping on one of our most controversial presidents.