



History of the White House Tapes

In 1971, President Nixon installed a secret taping system in selected portions of the White House, Oval Office, Old Executive Office Building, Cabinet Room and Camp David. Conversations were recorded between February 16, 1971 and July 18, 1973.

White House

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 that were then connected to recorders in an old locker room in the White House basement.

Old Executive Office Building

In April 1971, the Secret Service technicians installed four microphones in the President's office in the Old Executive Office Building (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.

Camp David

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.

Activation

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 was sound activated, operating without a conscious decision by the President to record a specific conversation. The recording system was tied to the Presidential Locator, a device used by the Secret Service to follow the President's movement in the White House complex, and would only be activated if the President was present in a room being recorded. It was designed to continue recording for fifteen to thirty seconds after the President left

the room. The recordings were produced on as many as nine Sony TC-800B machines using very thin 0.5 mil tape at the extremely slow speed of 15/16 inches per second.

Cabinet Room

The Cabinet Room recording system 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.

Publicity

The existence of the White House taping system was first made public during the testimony of Special Assistant Alexander Butterfield before the Senate Watergate Committee on July 16, 1973. According to his memoirs, Chief of Staff Alexander Haig ordered the removal of the taping system after viewing Butterfield's testimony. The system was removed July 18, 1973, although the President had not been recorded for several days since he was in the hospital from July 12 to July 20.

Quality [See Also: [Audio Quality of the White House Tapes](#)]

The reproductions provided by the National Archives are generally very faithful to the quality of the flawed original recordings.