

On Nixon Tapes, Ambivalence Over Abortion, Not Watergate



President Nixon pointing to the transcripts of White House tapes in April 1974, after he announced that he would give the material to lawmakers and make them public.

By CHARLIE SAVAGE
Published: June 23, 2009

WASHINGTON — On Jan. 22, 1973, when the Supreme Court struck down laws criminalizing abortion in *Roe v. Wade*, President Richard M. Nixon made no public statement. But the next day, newly released tapes reveal, he privately expressed ambivalence.

Nixon worried that greater access to abortions would foster “permissiveness,” and said that “it breaks the family.” But he also saw a need for abortion in some cases — like interracial pregnancies, he said.

“There are times when an abortion is necessary. I know that. When you have a black and a white,” he told an aide, before adding, “Or a rape.”

Nine months later, Nixon forced the firing of the special prosecutor looking into the Watergate affair, Archibald Cox, and prompted the resignations of Attorney General Elliot L. Richardson and Deputy Attorney General William D. Ruckelshaus. The next day, Ronald Reagan, who was then governor of California and would later be president, told the White House that he approved.

Reagan said the action, which would become known as the “Saturday Night Massacre,” was “probably the best thing that ever happened — none of them belong where they were,” according to a Nixon aide’s notes of the private conversation.

Those disclosures were among the revelations in more than 150 hours of tape and 30,000 pages of documents made public on Tuesday by the Nixon Presidential Library, a part of the National Archives. The audio files were posted online, as were a sampling of the documents.

The tapes were recorded by the secret microphones in the Oval Office from January and February 1973. They shed new light on an intense moment in American history, including Nixon’s second inauguration,

the Vietnam War cease-fire, and the trial of seven men over the break-in at the Democrats' headquarters at the Watergate complex amid mounting revelations about their ties to the White House.

The tapes also capture more mundane details of life in the White House — conversations about what to pack for a trip, when to schedule a trip to the barber, whether the president's wife would enjoy going to Trader Vic's for dinner.

Most segments of the tapes relating to the Watergate scandal, which would lead to Nixon's resignation 20 months later, have already been released. But there are some new materials that were previously held back because the audio quality was so poor that archives officials could not be certain whether they contained discussion of any classified topics. Improvements in audio technology have allowed archives staff to clear additional ones.

They include a Jan. 5, 1973, conversation between Nixon and his aide Charles W. Colson in which they discussed the possibility of granting clemency to E. Howard Hunt Jr., one of the Watergate conspirators, according to a log compiled by archives staff. Scholars say the same topic was addressed in several other tapes that were previously made public.

The documents also include nine pages of handwritten notes by a domestic policy aide about plans for what the White House would say about the dismissal of the Watergate special prosecutor, Mr. Cox.

The tapes also provide new material about the circumstances surrounding the Paris treaty to end the United States' military involvement in Vietnam.

A call between Nixon and Mr. Colson just after midnight on Jan. 20 showed that Nixon anticipated, when the treaty was announced, that he would be vindicated for continuing to bomb North Vietnam. He especially relished the hit that he believed members of Congress who opposed the war — whose public statements he pronounced “treasonable” — would suffer.

Several conversations center on the pressure Nixon placed on South Vietnam's president, Nguyen Van Thieu, to accept the cease-fire agreement. Ken Hughes, a Nixon scholar and research fellow at the Presidential Recordings Project at the University of Virginia, said he was struck by listening on one of the new tapes to Nixon's telling his national security adviser, Henry A. Kissinger, that to get Thieu to sign the treaty, he would “cut off his head if necessary.”

Mr. Hughes said the conversation bolstered his view that Nixon, Thieu and Mr. Kissinger knew at the time that the cease-fire could not endure, and that it was not “peace with honor,” as Nixon described it, so much as a face-saving way for the United States to get out of the war. In 1975, North Vietnam would violate the cease-fire and conquer South Vietnam.

The tapes also include a phone call from February 1973 between Nixon and the evangelist Billy Graham, during which Mr. Graham complained that Jewish-American leaders were opposing efforts to promote evangelical Christianity, like Campus Crusade. The two men agreed that the Jewish leaders risked setting off anti-Semitic sentiment.

“What I really think is deep down in this country, there is a lot of anti-Semitism, and all this is going to do is stir it up,” Nixon said.

At another point he said: “It may be they have a death wish. You know that's been the problem with our Jewish friends for centuries.”

The documents also include three newly declassified pages from a National Security Council brief discussing secret Israeli efforts to build a nuclear weapon.

