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DEPARTMENT HISTORIANS
DIG INTO THE NIXON TAPES

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President Nixon, left, and Secretary of State Kissinger confer on the south grounds of the White House in October 1973.

President Richard M. Nixon is usually remembered for three things: the Watergate scandal, the opening to China and détente with the Soviet Union. The Nixon presidency was really about much more, especially in the area of foreign policy.

In addition to its foreign and domestic policies, the Nixon administration is also remembered for the secret Oval Office taping system, which hastened Nixon's downfall when a presidential aide disclosed its existence to the congressional committee investigating Watergate. The first collection of tapes, released in 1996, continued to tarnish the reputation of the Nixon administration and swung the pendulum of historical opinion decidedly against Nixon. Significantly, the initial tape release constituted less than 200 hours of material drawn from nearly 3,700 total hours.

To put the tapes into proper context, the Department of State's historians have had access to the larger universe of classified tapes since 2000, and to high-quality digital materials since 2002. Mandated by Congress to produce a "thorough, accurate and reliable" record of U.S. foreign policy, the Department has reviewed hundreds of hours of material and transcribed more than 1,000 pages. The material will be included in the official documentary series, *Foreign Relations of the United States*. When the final volumes are published, these transcripts will represent the largest single source of Nixon tape transcripts in existence.



Richard Moss, seated, and Anand Toprani prepare to transcribe the Nixon tapes.

In Context

Taken out of context, some quotes from those transcripts have grabbed lurid headlines. For example, at the height of the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971, Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger derided Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi with rather intemperate language. Nixon and Kissinger were angry because they felt Gandhi had lied to them in November 1971 when she said that India wanted to avoid a war with Pakistan.

Journalists and scholars have often focused on the occasionally saucy language of the tapes rather than the substance of the conversations. The Office of the Historian encourages readers to consult the recordings themselves to gain a full appreciation of the content and context of the conversations.

In the course of its work, the office encountered moments that range from the profane to the poignant and from the introspective to the petty. Particularly interesting are Nixon's frequent soliloquies on a wide variety of subjects, especially when addressing small groups. Talking to an intimate group about the Defense budget, Nixon said: "If you compare us to the Russians, if you compare us to every other great power...we spend a hell of a lot, and all we do is we waste 300 pounds on a 150-pound frame."

Force and Diplomacy

Perhaps more than anyone else in his administration, including those in the military, Nixon recognized the need to sometimes marry force and diplomacy to achieve strategic objectives. Early in 1972, hoping to avoid an offensive by the North Vietnamese against the South Vietnamese, Nixon made several speeches and sent messages through a number of channels warning the North Vietnamese against any "precipitate" action. Nixon also prepared for a counterstrike, in the event of an offensive, by bolstering American airpower.

Transcripts Show Nixon's High Regard For China

One year after his historic trip to China, President Nixon on May 3, 1973, briefed Ambassador David K.E. Bruce, prior to his posting to Beijing. The following exchange, edited with ellipses, is from a section of the Nixon transcripts published in January.

Nixon: I mean, we've got to get along with this one-fourth of all people in the world, the ablest people in the world, in my opinion, potentially. We're going to get along, or not. It's no problem for the next five years, but in the next 20 years it's the critical problem of our age.

Bruce: Yes.

Nixon: China's it.

Bruce: Yes, I think it is.

Nixon: The other thing is...you should let them know how...how much I appreciated our welcome when we were there. The second thing, we look forward to sometime returning. Third, we would very much hope that Chou En-lai will see his way clear to come here to the U.N.—

Bruce: Yes, of course.

Nixon: —or something, as I would like to entertain him here—

Bruce: Um-hmm.

Nixon: —and it can be worked out in the proper way. And fourth—and I think this is the most important—that I look upon the Chinese and American relationship as, really, the key to peace in the world. Always have that in the back of your mind, without playing it too obviously, the fact that the only thing that makes the Russian game go is just the Chinese game.



National Security Adviser Kissinger gestures as he talks with President Nixon about a Vietnam settlement on November 25, 1972.

As Nixon bluntly stated in one Cabinet meeting: “If we think about the real problems of this war, public relationswise and the rest, I suppose many books will be written about it in the future...maybe it will come out all right... The only thing to do if the other guy gives you a, you know, a slap on the wrist [is] you kick him in the groin... You know, that's what we've got to do here.”

In May 1972, two weeks before going to Moscow for a historic summit meeting on the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty, Nixon linked improved relations with the Soviet Union to reduced Soviet support for the North Vietnamese, who were waging a massive offensive against South Vietnam. The President emphatically asked Brigadier General (and future Secretary of State) Alexander Haig: “How can you possibly go to



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Respect for FSOs

Nixon's contempt for the Department may be well known, but the tapes reveal that he also appreciated the dangers faced by the Foreign Service. Following the events in Sudan, Nixon expressed concern for Foreign Service officers serving in hazardous areas and coordinated with Secretary of State William Rogers to arrange a meeting with the Foreign Service Association to honor the victims and address the concerns of diplomatic personnel.

The transcripts used in *Foreign Relations* are the product of years of dedicated effort by Office of the Historian staff members. Transcribing the tapes entailed selection by historians, many reviews by transcribers and careful declassification and editing. In February, Department Historian Marc Susser reported to the Advisory Committee on Historical Diplomatic Documentation that his office's Nixon Tapes Group had completed all new research in and transcription of the Nixon tapes for the *Foreign Relations* series. Look for the transcripts to appear in more than a dozen forthcoming volumes of *Foreign Relations* at www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/nixon. ■

Richard Moss started in the Historian's Office as a graduate student intern and is now a contract historian. He is a Ph.D. candidate at George Washington University. Anand Toprani is contract historian and is a Ph.D. student at Georgetown University. Together, the authors completed the transcription work for the final 130 hours of tapes for inclusion in the Foreign Relations series.

the Soviet Union and toast to Brezhnev and Kosygin and sign a SALT agreement in the Great Hall of St. Peter when Russian tanks and guns are kicking the hell out of our allies in Vietnam?"

Nixon went through with the summit after he made the decision to mine Haiphong Harbor and escalate the bombing against Hanoi.

In early 1973, Henry Kissinger slipped into the Oval Office to inform Nixon that incoming U.S. Ambassador to the Sudan Cleo A. Noel Jr., Chargé d'Affaires George Curtis Moore and Belgium's Deputy Chief of Mission Guy Eide had been murdered by terrorists. The tapes captured a poignant silence as the men sat speechless for a few moments.