

John Dean on the Smoking Gun Tape

Some forty years too late, John Dean finally got around to admitting that the smoking gun tape, whose public release had driven Nixon from office, has been misinterpreted from the outset.

“When revealed by order of the U.S. Supreme Court in late July 1974, this became known as the “smoking gun” conversation, because it was viewed as hard evidence, demonstrating beyond question, that Nixon’s final defense about the Watergate break-in was bogus, which doomed the Nixon presidency. Ironically, this conversation has been mistakenly understood as an effort by Nixon and Haldeman to shut down the FBI’s entire Watergate investigation. This appears to be the case only when viewed out of context. In August 1974, when the conversation was revealed, and Nixon and his lawyers had to focus on this conversation, he had long forgotten what was actually involved; they assumed it had the same meaning as everyone else. In reality, it was only an effort by Haldeman to stop the FBI from investigating an anonymous campaign contribution from Mexico that Justice Department prosecutors had already agreed was outside the scope of the Watergate investigation. In fact, this conversation did not put the lie to Nixon’s statements, and had Nixon known that he might have survived its disclosure to fight another day. In short, the smoking gun was shooting blanks.”

Dean, John. *The Nixon Defense, What He Knew and When He Knew It*, (Viking, 2014) Footnote at pp. 55-56