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Tale of tape: Bliss case shows why new police policy right

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After they found the body and the suspect, after they reeled from shock to grief to anger, they found more horror in Waco.

A basketball coach trying to save his job by smearing the memory of a slain player.

A leader at a Baptist University directing players to suggest that the late Patrick Dennehy paid for his tuition by dealing drugs.

A head coach of 28 years, Dave Bliss, telling an assistant at Baylor, "If there's any way that we can create the perception of the fact that Pat may have been a dealer even if we had to kind of make some things look a little better than they are, that can save us."

If this shocking snippet of conversation had merely come from the memory of one man, Baylor assistant Abar Rouse, Bliss could have denied it.

But the words were captured secretly on audiotape - a tape Rouse made and provided to the Fort Worth Star-Telegram. When confronted with the recording, Bliss told the newspaper, "I was completely wrong in what I did."

Such an admission is rare in the absence of irrefutable evidence of wrongdoing.

Usually, the guilty profess to a memory lapse ("I don't remember saying that"); the guilty attribute unscrupulous motives to the accuser ("I'm a victim of a personal vendetta"); the guilty lie ("I never said that").

But here, Bliss was trapped by a tape - a stunning development from which police can draw a needed reminder: Words captured on tape ring with more truth than those recorded by hand.

Bliss, who faces possible criminal sanctions, resigned on Aug. 8. At the time, Baylor President Robert Sloan Jr. said that Bliss had admitted involvement in the improper tuition payments to two players.

But before he resigned, Bliss asked two players and Rouse to provide investigators with false information that Dennehy paid for tuition by selling drugs.

Rouse says he opposed the scheme, and to prove it, decided to tape Bliss with a concealed recorder. Wise move.

On the same day the Star-Telegram received tapes of Rouse's secret recordings, the San Antonio Police Department made its own judicious move.

Breaking with a longstanding and misguided policy of recording confessions by hand, the Police Department announced steps to begin videotaping the interrogations of felony suspects.

The reversal followed recent Express-News articles showing how defense lawyers effectively questioned tactics used by police to get statements.

In one homicide case, defense attorney Pat Hancock wondered why police managed to produce only a 29-line confession from his client after nearly three hours of questions.

In court, Hancock got detectives to admit that his client wept and expressed remorse - facts not included in the defendant's statement.

As a result, prosecutors lowered the charge from murder to manslaughter.

Defense attorney Bill Davidson also has problems with hand-recorded statements.

"They have the capability to videotape a DWI confession," Davidson recently said of police, "but they can't do it for something as important as a murder case?"

Videotaped confessions are not without problems. Defense lawyers, for example, can question whether coercion occurred before police began taping interrogations.

Also, police in Dallas and other cities that do not videotape interrogations are rarely in the position of the assistant Baylor coach - to secretly record a cover-up as it is being hatched.

Still, the hidden recorder in Waco underscores the importance of words on tape. "Reasonable doubt," Bliss said, "is there's nobody right now that can say we paid Patrick Dennehy."

A tape recording just eliminated one piece of doubt in an unraveling tragedy in Waco.

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