

18-Minute Gap To Be Revived By Final Data

By Philip Geyelin

Washington Post Staff Writer

The mystery of the 18½-minute gap in a crucial, Watergate-related tape recording will be revived in full force, probably next week, when a court-appointed panel is expected to present its voluminous, final report on the matter to U.S. District Court Judge John J. Sirica.

Precisely when the report will be made public is not clear. But officials in a position to know said yesterday that the panel has been putting final touches on it this week in Boston, and that its report will strongly reinforce the experts' earlier findings, presented in summary form to the court on Jan. 15, that the missing section can only have been the result of five to nine separate erasures and recordings done by hand.

Although this preliminary finding stopped short of saying that the erasures were made deliberately, it directly contradicted the only explanation the White House has ever given for the missing portion of a tape initially subpoenaed last July by former Watergate Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox. The fact that there was a gap was not revealed by the White House until November, when the tapes were surrendered in court. At that time, the President's personal secretary, Rose Mary Woods, attributed the missing passage to an accidental tripping of a foot pedal while she was distracted by a telephone call.

Even this accidental erasure, Miss Woods subsequently insisted, could probably have accounted for no more than five minutes of the total 18½-minute gap. No

clear explanation has been offered by the White House which would fit the experts' theory of five to nine separate hand manipulations of the recorder's control buttons, or would account for the total missing portion.

The final report by the six-man panel is not expected to resolve the question of how exactly the gap came about or of who might be responsible. But because it will reaffirm the already strong suggestion in the panel's first report that the erasure was not an accident, it will certainly sharpen this question at a time when the President's tapes, and his handling of them, are already the center of considerable controversy.

Mr. Nixon has been doggedly resisting demands for tape recordings and other records, from both the House Judiciary Committee and the Watergate special prosecutor, Leon Jaworski. The Judiciary Committee is expected today to grant the White House an extension until Tuesday of the deadline

for replying to a subpoena requesting 42 tapes and related material. Jaworski, meanwhile, has outstanding a subpoenaed request for 64 recordings and other documents—24 of which are also on the Judiciary Committee's list.

The famous 18½-minute gap is by no means the only mystery surrounding the tapes, all of which derive from a recording system which was sound-actuated and therefore presumably all-inclusive. Of the

original nine presidential conversations for which the tapes were subpoenaed on behalf of Special Prosecutor Cox, two tapes were missing altogether—the White House said the tape had run out before one of indicated there may be other un-recorded conversations among the 42 items on the Judiciary Committee's subpoena list. In addition, the six-man panel has been reliability reported to be studying gaps and other suspected irregularities involving the remaining six tapes in the first batch of material turned over to Cox. It is understood that these studies are not yet completed and that the findings will not be included in next week's report.

So far, however, no evidence of deliberate erasures or other tampering has been brought forward, beyond the questions raised by the court-appointed panel in connection with the 18½-minute gap. The White House was quick to challenge the panel's initial findings, and the President's Watergate defense counsel, James D. St. Clair, almost immediately engaged the services of his own expert, Dr. Michael Hecker of Stanford Research Institute. There have been a number of reports, however, that Hecker has been a disappointment to the White House, and is not prepared to challenge the court's experts; one member of Judge Sirica's panel was actually picked by the White House and one was chosen by the special prosecutor. The other four were jointly agreed to. Their initial findings were unanimous.

The panel's summary report has been sharply challenged by a private electronic expert, Allan D. Bell, head of Dektor Counterintelligence and Security, Inc., in Springfield, Va., which manufactures debugging equipment. It is understood that the court panel's final report will address itself directly to the questions raised by Bell.