

Prosecutors Eye October Weekend In Erasure Probe

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Steve Bull was asleep in his room at the Key Biscayne Hotel when the phone rang insistently, sometime after midnight on Oct. 5.

It was President Nixon's personal secretary, Rose Mary Woods, on the line. Bull, who is the President's appointments secretary and who was helping her review the subpoenaed Watergate tapes that weekend, hurried over to her villa nearby at the same hotel.

She said she was "having some difficulty" with the safe, Bull recalled, "so I came down and opened it."

The safe, which Bull had said was installed in Miss Woods' villa by the General Services Administration at his request, contained eight reels of tape laced with Mr. Nixon's conversations about the Watergate scandal. One of them included—at least at one time—a now obliterated strategy session between the President and then White House chief of staff H. R. (Bob) Haldeman on June 20, 1972, three days after the scandal broke open.

The erasures appear to have been deliberate, ac-

ording to a report by technical experts who have been analyzing the tape for the last two months. The whodunit has yet to be resolved. But Watergate special prosecutors have been focusing on the weekend at Key Biscayne with increasing persistence in their attempts to clear up the mystery. They suspect that this is when at least some of the erasures were made.

Flush-faced and tense in two appearances before U.S. District Court Chief Judge John J. Sirica last week, Bull testified that he couldn't remember much about his activities on the long Oct. 4-7 weekend. Assistant Watergate Special Prosecutor Richard Ben-Veniste jogged his memory Friday with a Secret Service chronology of the precise times at which the safe was opened.

Bull said he did little but take out tapes for Miss Woods as she needed them. The Secret Service had the safe under 24-hour guard, "but as far as opening the safe," Bull testified Friday. "I was the only person who



ROSE MARY WOODS
... reviewed tapes



STEPHEN BULL
... opened safe

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did that, quite frankly because I was the only one who knew how."

But he insisted that he couldn't recall "any dates of the tapes I handled that weekend," not even on the early morning errand that woke him up. Secret Service records show Bull opened the safe at 1:58 a.m. on Oct. 5 and closed it again at 2:03 a.m.

A 31-year-old aide who has worked at the White House since the start of the Nixon administration, Bull said Friday that he just couldn't remember whether Miss Woods summoned him to put something back in the safe or to take something out.

"At 1:58 (in the morning), I would assume it's a deposit," he told Ben-Veniste—in response to a question.

Q. At 2:30 a.m., the safe was closed, so that would be consistent with a deposit, would it not?

A. That would be consistent, I would think, at that time of night.

Q. Do you recollect what happened after that?

A. My recollection is that I returned to my room and went to bed.

Ben-Viste glanced at the Secret Service records again.

Q. Would it help your recollection if you knew that at 2:05 a.m., you opened the safe and that the safe remained open for another six minutes and then you closed it?

A. No.

Q. You don't know what that was about?

A. No.

Asked whether he took anything from the safe out of the villa, Bull said at first that he didn't recall, but then remembered picking up "an envelope containing a memorandum or something of that nature" one night down there.

He said he took it to Mr. Nixon's study at the presidential compound and left it on the President's desk.

"My recollection is that it was a courtesy to Miss Woods to make a delivery for her," Bull said.

Bull said the 10-by-14-inch brown envelope was sealed, but from the feel of it, he said it seemed to contain perhaps 10 sheets of paper. He said he was "reasonably certain" it did not contain a tape recording.

The presidential aide insisted that he could not remember whether he got the envelope from the safe in Miss Woods' villa, but he said he wouldn't quarrel with the idea that he picked it up when she summoned him from his hotel room around 2 a.m. Bull said he might have brought it to Mr. Nixon's study so that the President could look at it "first thing in the morning."

According to Bull, Mr. Nixon was not in his study when the delivery was made. Bull said he never saw the envelope again.

Q. And that is the only delivery you made?

A. That is the only one I recollect particularly.

Did Mr. Nixon listen to any tapes or read any transcripts of the subpoenaed recordings that weekend? Bull said he couldn't remember. Nor could he recall meeting with the President and White House chief of staff Alexander M. Haig Jr. on Oct. 6.

The President's lawyers, meanwhile, have insisted on keeping the logs of the President's comings and goings that weekend out of the public record, and offered them only for secret inspection by Judge Sirica.

Logs of the President's activities have been routinely been made public at the drawn-out hearings on the tapes before this, but newly hired White House special counsel James D. St. Clair laid down the new hard line

Friday in a bench conference that only participants could hear. The judge refused to look at the Key Biscayne logs on the conditions St. Clair tied to them.

The White House lawyer did stipulate for the record, however, that Bull did go in to see the President and Haig on Saturday, Oct. 6—from 11:30 to 11:35 a.m.

From there, Bull apparently went back to Miss Woods' villa. Secret Service records show he opened the safe once again at 11:50 a.m. Oct. 6 and locked it again five minutes later.

The records also show that Bull was not the only one to open the safe. In addition to Miss Woods, who evidently learned how to do it herself, the records reflect, the safe was also opened that weekend by a man named Dan Merryman of the White House Communications Agency. He opened it in Miss Woods' presence the night of Oct. 5. She closed it a minute later, at 8:09 p.m.

Bull had testified that only he and Miss Woods had the combination to the safe, which Bull said was provided by GSA. Asked how the White House Communications Agency could have opened it, Bull said: "I probably was in error when I said that GSA had installed the safe. Perhaps it was the

communications agency."

St. Clair suggested that Miss Woods simply needed someone else to help her open the safe again.

Miss Woods has testified that she finished work on the erased tape in her White House office a few days earlier, on Oct. 1. She said she might have caused a short gap in the recording that day when she twisted around at her desk to answer a five-minute phone call. She said she reported the accident to Mr. Nixon right away, after discovering that she'd pushed the wrong key on the new Uher recording machine the Secret Service had just bought for her.

Miss Woods also said that she listened to the recording for "probably 2, maybe 2½" hours that day. She said she turned off the Uher as soon as she finished her phone call and noticed her mistake. Then, she said she played the tape back briefly to discover a shrill buzzing noise, and went to tell the President of her "terrible mistake" about five minutes later.

"I would say I went into his office around 2:15 p.m.,"

one of those that Bull packed and carried down to Key Biscayne for her on Oct. 4 in a large carrying bag along with the Uher.

The technical experts who studied the tape have said that the 18½-minute gap on it was the result of at least five separate erasures, all done manually and "almost surely" on the Uher recorder—but not necessarily all at the same time.

In any event, Ben-Veniste submitted to Judge Sirica at a whispered conference Friday, what happened at Key Biscayne that weekend "is extremely important."

Miss Woods testified last November. "I was very upset, as you can imagine."

Mr. Nixon's logs for Oct. 1 show him meeting with Miss Woods in his suite at the Executive Office Building at 2:08 p.m. At that point, she had had the Uher recording machine—freshly bought at lunchtime by the Secret Service on Bull's instructions—for less than an hour.

Miss Woods has testified that Oct. 1 was the last day she worked on the tape, making up a rough transcript for the President. Despite that, the recording was