

Tape Detectives To Keep Mum

*F. P. ...
9/10/74*

WASHINGTON (AP) — The six experts who did the detective work on 18½ minutes of erased White House Watergate tape have been dismissed with thanks and an admonition not to talk — for a while.

The team's six-months effort discovered the how of the erasure but not the who. The why can only be guessed at.

U.S. District Judge John J. Sirica, advising the panelists of their release, said they were under no further restrictions of silence.

"However, for the sake of caution," he wrote each man, "the court urges that you refrain from public comment about the panel's work until after a jury has been sequestered in the Watergate cover-up case."

Sirica will preside over that trial, expected to begin Sept. 30.

The gap was in the first tapes subpoenaed from the recorded conversations of then President Richard M. Nixon with his aides.

The panelists were Dr. Richard H. Bolt, a former professor of physics at MIT, Franklin S. Cooper of the University of Connecticut; James L. Flanagan of Bell Laboratories; John G. McKnight, consultant to the dictaphone corp.; Thomas G. Stockham of the University of Utah and Mark R. Weiss, vice president of a New York acoustics research firm.

They had been selected jointly last November by the Nixon White House and the Watergate special prosecutor to check the authenticity of the tapes.

But by the time they first met on Nov. 21, Nixon counsel J. Fred Buzhardt had told the court he and a colleague "discovered that approximately 18 minutes on one of the tapes of June 20, 1972 contained a tone and no conversation."

That conversation, taking place three days after the Watergate break-in, was between Nixon and his chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman.

The experts issued a final report on June 4, saying the erasure was done by hand and in-

cluded at least five and perhaps as many as nine separate and contiguous erasures.

It was, one of the experts explained, as if someone had erased a portion, played it back to make sure the wipe-out was complete, and then went on to the next segment.

"This report draws no inferences about such questions as whether the erasure and buzz were made accidentally or intentionally, or when, or by what person or persons," the report said.

But it said it was clear they were made on the recorder used by Nixon's personal secretary, Rose Mary Woods. Testimony at days of hearings produced evidence that Miss Woods was one of five people handling the tape. One of the other four was Nixon himself.

Miss Woods said she was transcribing the Haldeman conversation when her telephone rang. She said she took off her earphones, reached for the stop button with her right hand but hit the record-erase button instead. In the 4-5 minutes she was on the telephone, Miss Woods said, she must have kept her foot on the start pedal. She had no explanation for the other 13 minutes of erasure.

An estimate was made some time ago that the study of the 86 feet of tape cost about \$100,000.