

President Damaged, Hill Feels

By Lou Cannon
and David S. Broder

Washington Post Staff Writers

The disclosure of multiple erasures in a key Watergate tape was viewed yesterday by influential congressional Republicans as a damaging blow to President Nixon.

Some predicted it would speed the action of the House Judiciary Committee in voting on an impeachment resolution. Others said that it would make any efforts by Mr. Nixon to restore his shattered credibility much more difficult.

"This is the most serious single bit of evidence to date," said Rep. John Anderson of Illinois, leader of the House Republican Conference. "The theory that there has been a conscious effort to conceal evidence is no longer a theory."

House Minority Leader John Rhodes of Arizona, asked whether the disclosure makes the voting of an impeachment resolution more likely, responded: "It doesn't help." Rhodes said he expected the committee to vote in favor of impeachment and added that he would "listen to the evidence" before making his own decision.

In Memphis, Sen. Howard Baker of Tennessee, ranking Republican on the Senate Watergate Committee, termed the disclosure "another in an unfortunate bizarre set of circumstances" and called it "potentially damaging" to the President.

Rep. Thomas Railsback (R-Ill.) said that the finding of the panel of tape experts was more serious than the discovery of the tape gap and "shifts the burden back to the President to substantiate the original story or explain that something happened of which the President had no knowledge."

One of the Senate's most prominent Democrats made



Associated Press

Watergate prosecutors Jill Volner and Richard Ben-Veniste enter courthouse for hearing.

the same point.

"This creates the most serious problem to date, no doubt about it," said Sen. Henry Jackson of Washington, in Olympia. "The burden has shifted for the President and his White House aides to explain what went on."

Another Democrat, Rep. John Brademas of Indiana, said: "The destruction of evidence leads us to but one conclusion: the total destruction of Mr. Nixon's credibility."

In Los Angeles, former

See REACT, A8, Col. 1

REACT, From A1

Atty. Gen. Elliot Richardson expressed "dismay and concern" at the disclosure.

"I think that the President and his administration have already faced and do face a serious problem of credibility and public confidence and these findings certainly will not help," Richardson said.

Anderson described the report of the tape panel as the "penultimate link in the chain of evidence that has steadily been forged to show that there has been a conscious deliberate effort . . . to obstruct justice." The ultimate link, he said, would be to show that this obstruction was directly ordered by the White House.

"Not only was the tape doctored deliberately, but it probably occurred on the machine that Miss (Rose Mary) Woods used," Anderson said. "Certainly, a very limited number of people in the White House would have had access to that machine. Sherlock Holmes has solved a lot tougher cases than that, either by induction or deduction."

The panel of experts said that the machine used to erase the 18.5 minute section of tape was "almost surely" the same one used by Miss Woods in monitoring the conversation.

"One has the feeling of approaching the final denouement in this drama," Anderson said. "I fail to see how this can do anything but accelerate the tempo of the impeachment process."

A number of congressmen in both parties were unavailable for comment because they are stumping their districts during the last week of the congressional recess. Others said that they did not want to comment until they had seen the full report. But most agreed that the disclosure was particularly untimely for President Nixon, coming as it does at a time when the Congress was reconvening without any fixed determination to impeach the President.

None of the Republicans who commented yesterday defended Mr. Nixon, although several said that the disclosure did not prove

that the President had ordered the erasures.

Vice President Gerald R. Ford said through a spokesman: "This is a technical and confusing matter about which I have no personal knowledge. Therefore I have no comment on it."

Sen. Sam J. Ervin (D-N.C.), chairman of the Senate Watergate Committee, was en route to Mexico and unavailable for comment. But a source close to Ervin said he expected the disclosure to increase the committee's insistence on its right to the tapes.

President Nixon has refused to turn over tapes and documents requested by the committee, contending that the requests are unconstitutional invasions of presidential power.

Anderson said that the disclosure also "makes it imperative" that the House insist that Watergate Prosecutor Leon Jaworski reverse his position and turn over tapes given by the President to the House Judiciary Committee.

Two Democratic members of the Senate Watergate Committee said that the new disclosure was a major blow to the President.

"It's incredible," said Sen. Daniel Inouye of Hawaii. "I'm saddened because I was hoping that the report would have shown this was the result of some legitimate accident."

In Albuquerque, N.M., Sen. Joseph Montoya of New Mexico said the disclosure "clearly confirms the already prevalent opinion of the nation as to the credibility of the President."

A Republican member of the committee, Lowell Weicker of Connecticut, said he didn't want to comment on the latest disclosure but predicted that it wouldn't be the only revelation to come forth.

Weicker said he "wished the President would take the lead" in disclosing information to the Watergate committee and to the country.

"As long as he sticks to the course of giving the leastest information at the latest date, he'll be in difficulty," Weicker said.

Rep. Barber Conable of New York, chairman of the

House GOP Policy Committee, said that every new disclosure "is part of a downward spiral of confidence the public can feel in government."

Conable said that the "only group" that could now influence Mr. Nixon was the House Republicans.

"I expect John Rhodes is deciding the Republican Party cannot afford to have total identification with

Richard Nixon," Conable said.

Rhodes did not attempt to disassociate the party from the President yesterday, pointing out that the latest disclosure did not indicate who was responsible for the erasure. But he also pointedly declined to commit himself either way on an impeachment resolution.

"I'm going to listen to the evidence," Rhodes said.

"This is a judicial function we're supposed to perform and I'm a lawyer and I don't believe in making a decision before the evidence is in."

Rhodes said that Rep. Peter Rodino, (D-N.J.) chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, had told him that he expected committee action on an impeachment resolution sometime in April. Rodino was not available for comment.