

FBI Starts Probe of Erasure

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The FBI has begun an investigation of the erasure of the 18½-minute segment of the June 20, 1972, White House tape recording, according to FBI and other reliable sources.

The opening of the investigation, requested by special Watergate prosecutor Leon Jaworski, is the firmest indication to date that Jaworski's staff has concluded that the erasure of the tape may be a criminal act, the sources said.

Several sources familiar with the tape case have said this week that two White House employees who may be questioned by the FBI — the President's personal secretary, Rose Mary Woods, and staff aide Stephen Bull—both have been asked by others in the White House if they were responsible for the 18½-minute erasure.

The sources said that it was unclear if the President and his aides were trying to shift the blame for the erasure or whether they were simply trying to find out what happened. "But," one source said, "the approaches had an edge to them and there is a lot more there than the White House trying to investigate."

In mid-November, 1973, the President asked Miss Woods if she would take responsibility for erasure of the full 18½-minute portion rather than just a 5-minute segment that she had told the President she might have accidentally erased six weeks earlier, these sources said, but she said no.

Miss Woods then denied in court that she could have erased the entire 18½-minute portion of the tape, which had been a recording of a conversation between the President

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and his former chief of staff H. R. Haldeman, according to Haldeman's White House notes.

Bull also was questioned about the gap, the sources said. One source said, "They (White House officials) tried to pin it on him." Another source said the President himself questioned Bull about the erasure.

On Tuesday Bull told The Washington Post that these accounts were "absurd." But he added, "I'm neither denying nor confirming it."

Bull has denied that he erased any of the tape.

If the FBI inquiry into the erasure of the tape involves interviews with White House employees, as one source indicated it might, it could precipitate a dispute with the White House, which could invoke executive privilege and refuse to cooperate with the inquiry.

Sources said yesterday that the investigation could lead to possible charges of obstruction of justice, destruction of evidence (the segment of the tape), or perjury by one or more of the witnesses who have testified about the tape recently before Chief U.S. District Judge John J. Sirica here. Sirica has been conducting hearings into whether the White House has properly complied with the special prosecutor's subpoena of White House tapes.

The possibility of an erasure on any of the tapes was raised publicly in a Nov. 8 story in The Washington Post that quoted a reliable source as saying that an erasure on one or more of the tapes is of a suspicious nature, and "could lead someone to conclude that the tapes have been tampered with."

White House press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler was quoted in the story as saying he is "confident that there have not been any erasures." It was not until 10 days later that the 18½-minute erasure was disclosed in court. This was after the White House had unsuccessfully urged special prosecutor Jaworski to delay the public disclosure of the erasure.

Charles S. Rhyne, the lawyer representing Miss Woods, said yesterday in a telephone interview that he is not con-

vinced that the panel of six electronic experts is correct in the report to Judge Sirica that the erasure was made on a Uher 5000 tape recorder that was purchased Oct. 1 by the White House. Miss Woods, Bull and Mr. Nixon are the only persons shown by testimony so far to have handled this Uher recorder.

Rhyne also said he believes that the question of who has had access to the June 20, 1972, tape, since its recording needs to be more fully explored.

Secret Service personnel, the President, Miss Woods, Bull and several government sources have raised the possibility that the June 20 tape was one of those that former White House chief of staff Haldeman took to a private residence here in July.

Court testimony has left unclear the question of exactly

what tapes Haldeman had access to. However, White House records indicate that Haldeman did not take out the June 20 tape.

Sources familiar with the investigation also have said that there is additional information sealed by Judge Sirica that has

a bearing on the investigation. Specifically, the sources said information has been sealed that would help explain exactly why presidential counsel J. Fred Buzhardt testified in November that there is "no innocent explanation" for the erasure.