

Nixon and the 18-Minute Tape Gap

By Jack Anderson

The Watergate prosecutors are investigating the possibility that Richard Nixon himself may have erased the famous 18½-minute segment from the tape of his June 20, 1972, conversation with H. R. Haldeman.

The missing discussion, according to Haldeman's notes, dealt with the Watergate break-in.

Sources close to the prosecutors' office describe Mr. Nixon as a "key suspect" in their investigation, although they have developed no "solid evidence" that would incriminate him.

The 18½-minute conversation was wiped off the tape, according to a panel of experts, by someone who made five stop-and-start erasures. The erasing was done, it is almost sure, on the Uher 5000 recorder used by the President's private secretary, Rose Mary Woods.

The evidence strongly suggests, therefore, that the culprit was an amateur who had access to both the tapes and Miss Woods' recorder. As a practical matter, this would eliminate almost everyone except Mr. Nixon, Miss Woods and White House assistant Stephen Bull.

Both the President and Miss Woods listened to the tape at

Camp David on Sept. 29, 1973. The President, according to sworn grand jury testimony, donned earphones and pushed buttons.

But it wasn't until two days later that she got the Uher 5000, which apparently was used to erase the 18½ minutes. She had requested a machine with a foot-pedal device. It was delivered to Bull, who had ordered it, at 1:15 p.m. on October 1. He brought it to her the same afternoon.

She later heard the 18½-minute buzz and rushed into the oval office to tell the President about it. Her attorney, Charles Rhyne, told us she has never been sure she caused the gap, although she assumed the blame at first. The tape could have been erased by someone else, he said, before she discovered it.

But who would fool with the recorder of the President's private secretary? Could the President have heard something he didn't like on the June 20 tape that day at Camp David and later have slipped into Rose Mary Woods' office to erase the critical conversation? Or could he have done it or ordered it done sometime before Sept. 29, 1973?

Sources close to the prosecution believe this could have happened. But one thing troubles them. Why would the President erase 18½ minutes from the June 20 tape and leave 2½ minutes of incriminating conversation on the June 23 tape? The fateful 2½ minutes have now been the President's undoing.

Other sources suggest that the President may not have bothered to listen to the June 23 tape last fall because it hadn't yet been subpoenaed. It took a Supreme Court order last month to get him to give up the June 23 tape along with 63 others.

These were transcribed by the Secret Service, which kept the originals and supplied the President's office only with duplicates. Stephen Bull listened to the duplicates, located the crucial conversations and then brought them into the President to monitor.

By then, it was too late for anyone in the President's office to tamper with it.

WASHINGTON WHIRL: Up to the last minute, President Nixon kept hoping for a dramatic development that he could use to rally the public behind him again. He rejected another last-ditch TV appeal, tell-

ing aides that he was waiting for the right move. It was clear from his conversation, say our sources, that he was looking for a breakthrough he could use for an emotional Checkers-style appeal to the nation. . . . After the revelation that the President had ordered the Central Intelligence Agency to be used to obstruct the FBI's investigation of Watergate, he still insisted to friends that he didn't understand at the time this was obstruction of justice. He looked upon it, rather, as merely an attempt to cover up a political embarrassment. . . .

We can't resist recalling how the White House squawked when we reported on April 7, 1973, that "the Central Intelligence Agency has ordered its agents not to talk to the Federal Bureau of Investigation about the explosive Watergate case." A month later on May 8, we quoted from an actual FBI memo telling about the CIA's obstruction. . . . Richard W. Velde, who has just been named head of the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, was arrested in 1972 for violating federal migratory bird laws. He forfeited \$50 collateral rather than stand trial.

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