

WATERGATE

The blanked tape had problems

WASHINGTON — A White House official said yesterday the subpoenaed Watergate tape containing an 18-minute blank in President Nixon's conversation with H. R. Haldeman is the same part that Nixon's personal secretary, Rose Mary Woods, spent about 30 hours trying to transcribe.

U.S. District Judge John J. Sirica demanded immediate custody of Nixon's Watergate-related tapes when White House lawyer J. Fred Buzhardt told him Wednesday about a recently discovered segment missing from the crucial tape of a 2½ hour meeting between Nixon and former aides Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman on June 20, 1972, three days after the Watergate break-in.

The official, who declined to be named, said Sirica's demand still was "under consideration." He was the first White House aide to identify the June 20 tape as the one Miss Woods has complained was difficult to transcribe.

Earlier, Miss Woods testified at a Sirica court hearing that she spent about 30 hours at Camp David, Md., during the weekend of last Sept. 29 doing her best to transcribe a tape she said she could not identify. She said the "quality was very bad," but never mentioned an 18-minute gap in the conversation.

"It was a very bad tape, very, very difficult," she said. "The President said it would be difficult, that I couldn't get all the words...

but to do my best to get the most important tapes."

Asked if she told anyone about the audibility problem, she replied: "Yes, the President," and added she was told "to take down as much as possible that was audible."

Buzhardt said he discovered the 18-minute gap on the tape Nov. 14 and reported it to the President "shortly thereafter." He explained the delay in the discovery by saying there was confusion whether the Nixon-Haldeman conversation was actually covered by the subpoena for the June 20 meeting issued by former special prosecutor Archibald Cox and upheld by Sirica.

The White House official said the Cox subpoena had been interpreted as calling

for a recording of a three-way meeting among Nixon, Haldeman and domestic adviser John D. Ehrlichman, but that actually Nixon met separately with Ehrlichman and then with Haldeman. He said the 18-minute gap in the Haldeman portion of the tape wasn't discovered earlier because it had been believed that only the preceding Ehrlichman recording, which is complete, was called for by the subpoena.

However, Cox filed a subpoena memorandum with Sirica last Aug. 13 in which he spelled out the time and place of the recording he wanted, and indicated he was talking about two consecutive conversations.

Specifically, Cox said Nixon "met with John D. Ehrlichman and H. R. Haldeman . . . on June 20, 1972 from 10:30 a.m. until approximately 12:45 p.m." He also said "Ehrlichman and then Haldeman went to see the President."