

The Tape: Testimony Hints Evidence Was

By JOHN HERBERS

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Jan. 15—

Once again, just as it appeared that President Nixon was weathering the Watergate crisis, another startling disclosure has aroused suspicions of further criminal acts in the White House and inflicted new damage on the President's credibility.

News Analysis

The testimony today of technical experts in United States District Court—that the 18½-minute gap on one of Mr. Nixon's Watergate tape recordings was caused by erasing and re-recording five and perhaps as many as nine segments of the tape—strongly suggested that someone in the White House deliberately destroyed evidence at some time during the summer or fall of last year.

This would mean that the White House cover-up of the Watergate burglary continued after President Nixon said he had first become aware of it, took steps to investigate and correct the matter and accepted the resignations of his two principal aides, H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman. That was in March of last year.

The White House sought to suspend the public's judgment on the testimony, saying that the technical report "is only a summary" and there has been no judicial conclusion in the matter.

Nevertheless, the develop-

ment spread a new layer of gloom through White House offices, where morale has dropped with every new disclosure. One official close to the President said, "This certainly does not help."

And the first reaction from Capitol Hill and from political leaders elsewhere was that this was another very damaging development for Mr. Nixon and his Presidency.

"This creates the most serious problem to date," said Senator Henry M. Jackson, Democrat of Washington. "The burden has shifted for the President and his White House aides to explain what went on."

Senator Jackson is a frequent foe of the President but the reaction from Republicans was little better. Senator Howard H. Baker of Tennessee, vice chairman of the Senate Watergate committee, called the development "another in an unfortunate bizarre set of circumstances."

Today's disclosure came just as Mr. Nixon was preparing

to go into a round of intense Presidential activity that his assistants hoped would help turn attention away from Watergate—delivery of a State of the Union and economic messages to Congress, release of the executive budget for the coming fiscal year and convening of a worldwide energy conference here next month.

New Questions Raised

Even before the disclosure, new questions of White House credibility were raised over the last few days by reports of a military information ring inside the White House in 1971. A high official in the White House described as "ludicrous" today the confidential report on the activities prepared by David R. Young Jr., a former Presidential aide. This seemed to contradict flatly oft-stated assertions by President Nixon that the issue was far more important and so highly sensitive that it should not be made public.

Today's testimony was believed by both friends and foes

of the President to be particularly damaging because of previous testimony on the tapes that spread wide distrust of how the White House had handled evidence sought by the courts.

The erased portion in question was a conversation between Mr. Nixon and Mr. Haldeman on June 20th, 1972, in which the two discussed the burglary of Democratic headquarters, which had been discovered three days earlier.

Testimony before Judge Sirica last fall showed that the tapes had been handled by several people in the White House, had been checked in and out with the transactions being documented only on brown paper bags. Some were entrusted to Rose Mary Woods, the President's personal secretary, for the transcribing in September, and she testified that she could accidentally have erased some portion of the June 20th tape, when she answered the telephone and pressed the wrong button.

1974

Destroyed

The contentio of accidental erasure was widely disbelieved, according to public opinion polls with today's testimony, the White House was left with the burden of showing that there had not been deliberate destruction of evidence.

There was no indication today that the White House lawyers were in any way prepared to do this. Even if no criminal act is proved, it is widely believed that the President now faces an even greater problem of public confidence than before.

Former Attorney General Elliot L. Richardson, in response to questions at a Los Angeles news conference, said he believed the testimony would increase pressures for impeachment, which White House officials have said were beginning to decline.

"I think the President and his Administration have already faced and do face a serious problem of credibility," Mr. Richardson said. "And these findings certainly will not help."