

18 and One-Half Minutes of This Interview Are Missing

By Judy Bachrach
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Washington

"THEY'RE CRUCIFYING him," said Stephen Bull's mother. "Steve is being put through so much and it's all so terrible."

Abruptly she stopped talking. Finally:

"Frankly, I don't know why I'm even talking to you. Stephen is — oh he's so kind and he has such integrity — so much integrity."

Stephen Bull's mother says she has a lot of stories to tell about her son's integrity.

"But I won't tell them to you. You'll turn it into something awful. The press is crucifying my son."

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"O KAY" SAYS Stephen Bull with a scarcely perceptible shrug. "What did my mother tell you?"

A wry smile plays around his lips as he listens to the response.

"Well you know," says Bull as he dives into the creamed lima beans, "my mother's worried. It's only natural."

Margaret Mason, Stephen Bull's mother, had her worries ignited in November. In that month it was discovered that a certain tape turned over to Judge John Sirica contained a gap 18½ minutes long.

It was a very consequential tape, containing as it did a conversation between President Nixon and H. R. (Bob) Halde- man that took place three days after the Watergate break-in.

And it became even more consequential last month when a panel of experts reported that the gap in this tape had been caused by at least five erasures. According to Bull's courtroom testimony, White House counsel Fred Buzhardt and Deputy Presidential Assistant John C. Bennett were among those who had access to the tape. One was Rose Mary

Woods, the President's personal secretary, who admitted having accidentally erased only five minutes. One was the President himself.

And one was Stephen B. Bull, a 32-year-old special assistant to the President.

This is why his mother is worried.

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IN THE LIVING ROOM of his Bethesda, Md., home, Bull lights a Marlboro. "See, my mother is worried because I'm going before a grand jury. No mother would be happy about that. And she's real — well she's real old-line Garden City (Long Island). You know what that means?"

According to Anne Bull, his wife, old-line Garden City is conservative and middle class.

"Well anyway," Bull continues, attacking the leftover lamb drowning in tomato sauce, "anyway, she can't get used to the idea that anything could go wrong in a conservative, Republican administration. Especially one where her own son works."

Anne Bull smiles a grim smile. Then she says, "The noose tightens."

"Yeah," says her husband. "The noose tightens.' Every night my mother turns on the set and some network news guy is saying, 'The field is narrowing down to three people. The noose tightens.'"

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STEPHEN BULL says he didn't do it. "They're impeaching my integrity," he says, pouring a cocktail into a little glass with elephants prancing all around it. The reporter's glass bears Richard Nixon's signature and the words "Air Force One."

Bull lights another Marlboro, crosses his legs. "I have not erased any tapes. Why, I didn't even hear the portion of the tape that was said to have been erased."

Said to have been erased?

"Well, since I never heard it, I don't know if it was erased or not." He goes on to explain the circumstances surrounding the subpoenaing of the tape, but for the first — and last — time that evening his words grow fuzzy. Bull shakes his head.

"If my words come out sounding like cotton wool, it's because I smoked more than two packs of cigarettes today"

Stephen Bull doesn't think Rose Mary Woods did it.

"No, no. I know Rose and when she says she accidentally erased only five minutes, I believe it."

"Stephen," says one pal who remembers when he scarcely smoked at all, "Stephen must be so terribly distressed these days. Because he knows that if the sinister force didn't do it, then someone he likes very much must have had that tape erased."

Stephen Bull doesn't think Richard Nixon did it, either.

"I have no theories. But why doesn't



**NIXON AIDE STEPHEN BULL.
The tapes are a mystery to him, too**

someone start thinking of the Secret Service? I mean," he amends. "I'm not saying they did it. I don't know. But why not them?"

STEPHEN BULL sees the President "10 to 20 times a day" and he likes him very much. Stephen Bull has liked Richard Nixon ever since his vice presidential days. Richard Nixon was the first politician Bull ever worked for, and in the late summer of '67 he took leave of absence from his job to work on the campaign for no pay at all. Stephen Bull says he likes Richard Nixon because their political philosophies mesh, but there's probably more to it than that.

"It's the American dream," says a friend. "Richard Nixon symbolizes the American dream to Steve. Nixon was born poor and made it. And Steve — well he wasn't born poor, but he wasn't rich, either."

When Bull was 13, his father died of a heart attack.

"And you don't know," says his mother. "You can't possibly know what it was like for that young boy to lose a father."

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STEVE BULL began his career by working for Canada Dry where he promoted such beverages as Wink and the ill-fated Sport cola. By the time he left to work as an advance man on Richard Nixon's '68 campaign, he was assistant to the then-president of Canada Dry, David J. Mahoney. Until recently, Mahoney headed the bicentennial commission.

It was Haldeman who asked Bull to stay on after the campaign was over. At the time, the eager young man of 26 didn't know Haldeman, but he was "exhilarated" and grew to admire his boss enormously. Bull describes Haldeman as "a brilliant man who got to the root of problems with ease," but he adds that he didn't see him socially and hasn't spoken with Haldeman since July.

"I keep my distance from my bosses — and Haldeman was the boss." Bull mulls over that awhile. "It's probably related to my military career, where different ranks don't socialize."

Stephen Bull says he didn't do it. He doesn't think Rose Mary Woods did it, and he doesn't think Richard Nixon did it, either. "But why doesn't someone start thinking of the Secret Service? I'm not saying they did it. I don't know. But why not them?"

"The chain of command," explains Anne Bull. Her husband was a Marine.

"Well, nobody's pally with Haldeman," says one old associate, "but I think you could say Haldeman and Bull had a kind of father-son relationship. Now Nixon and Bull have a kind of god-person relationship."

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BULL WAS rapidly promoted — in part because he was a Haldeman favorite, in part because so many others left. He took over Dwight Chapin's duties, then some of Alexander Butterfield's as well. Butterfield's included supervision of the White Houses tapes. On June 4, while Richard Nixon listened to hours of tape, it was Bull who helped him locate conversations.

The press calls Bull Richard Nixon's appointments secretary. Bull says this isn't entirely accurate, although he does watch over Richard Nixon's appointments. The question "What are you?" elicits the answer, "Whatever you want me to be." And a smile.

"In the early days," says the former associate, "Nixon never could quite get Steve Bull's name straight. He'd refer to him as Mr. uh, Mr. uh — uh my assistant. . . ."

Bull finds the President to be a "warm individual, an individual who knows what he can and cannot delegate."

Steve Bull thinks Richard Nixon will go down in history as one of our greatest presidents.

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"**S**TEVE BULL," says one detractor, "is Nixon's boy. When Nixon snaps his fingers Bull comes running. Nixon never treats him like he has much respect for him."

"Well," says Peter Malatesta, a former Agnew aide and a friend of Bull, "they used to say the same thing about me and Agnew. You take that with a grain of salt."

Bull just shrugs. "There are worse things you can say about a man," he says.

But one source is reported to have said that White House officials tried to pin the rap on the loyal Bull.

Bull snorts at the suggestion. "I'll tell you what I told the first reporter who asked that. It's a lot of bullshit." He chuckles. "And you may quote me."

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"**S**TEVE BULL," says a friend, "is very ethical and very fair. And if I had to pick an aide it would be Steve. Steve is loyal and self-effacing. Maybe the best way to describe him is to say he once was a Marine. But a Marine who thinks."

So it must all seem very strange right now for Steve Bull. It must be odd for the man nobody knew much about or cared much about to suddenly be the object of public scrutiny the moment he steps out and attends, say, a Peter Malatesta party.

"It'll all be over soon," says Bull.

"It'll all be over soon," echoes Mrs. Bull. And she nods her head brightly.

Stephen Bull follows the reporter to the door. "You'll find," he says, "as you review your notes, that 18½ minutes are missing."